# WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS

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## *A CRITICAL STUDY*

BY

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UNIV. OF CALIFORNIA

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

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**Printed in the United States of America**

To

STUART PRATT SHERMAN

AND

ERNEST BERNBAUM

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## NOTE

The author is indebted to Harper and Brothers and Houghton Mifflin Company for their generous permission to quote from the works of William Dean Howells, and to the editor of *The Texas Review* for permission to use with slight changes an article which first appeared in that journal.

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## I

### THE MAN

CRITICISM has been reluctant to associate with William Dean Howells those human qualities he most prized or to identify the informing spirit of his art with the spirit of democratic living upon which he was most insistent. He will presently be established in the critical consciousness as a literary leader, as a social historian, and as an unrivalled technician. In the mind of the student of letters, he will emerge from the great artistic evolution that was consciously forming the world-literature of his time—the realistic movement, as we loosely style it—the most conspicuous figure on this side of the Atlantic. Many of less exclusive interests will look to him, with astonishment at the accuracy of his methods and at the length and singleness of his devotion, as an indispensable recorder of the national life. And his perfection in all that relates to literary handling ought to become a still more compelling source of refreshment and renewal to the fellows of his craft. But these valuations of his worth

all point to a writer of yesterday. In one way or another they commit him to the shadows of literary history, while all that he valued in literature was an essence that is timeless. He was content to rest his title to immortality on qualities of spirit that were to Chaucer and to Cervantes.

His exploits as a literary leader group themselves about one central purpose—the substitution of simple humane criteria for all others, literary or moral. The enterprises to which he lent the weight of his authority—and he commanded an almost superstitious reverence—were calculated to loose in America dynamic forces that should make for a humanistic and democratic literature. And I do not believe that he cared greatly about the nature of those forces, provided they propelled the native talent in the right direction. He was eager in the support of such disparate undertakings as the popularization of the Russian novel and the establishment of a school of local or regional fiction, wishing American literary youth to catch the complete naturalness and high seriousness with which the Russian masters handled their material and fearing lest it fall under the spell of foreign themes and foreign color. If the notoriety he once enjoyed as a doctrinaire and dogmatist persists, it is because some of his opponents made literature of their controversial writings, Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, putting the remonstrance greeting him as a bondslave and zealot of the narrowest convictions into *Memories and Portraits*. But it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the chief of his aims as a schoolmaster was the abolition of

discipleship and pupilage. Mr. Hamlin Garland, who told us through the magazines long before he produced *A Son of the Middle Border* how he became an adherent of Howells in the eighties, when Howells was an "issue," was greatly impressed by this fact and recorded his realization of it glowingly:

"As the art which Mr. Howells represents declines to be held accountable to any age, or land, or individual, so it discourages discipleship. It says to the young writer: 'Look to nature and to actuality for your model—not to any book, or man, or number of men. Be true to yourself. Write of that of which you know the most, and follow faithfully the changes in your feeling. Put yourself down before common realities, common hopes, common men, till their pathos and mystery, and significance flood you like a sea, and when the life that is all about you is so rich with drama and poetry, and the vista of human thought and passion so infinite that you are in despair of ever expressing a thousandth part of what you feel, then all idea of discipleship will be at an end. Your whole aim will be to be true to yourself and your infinite teacher, nature, and you will no longer strive to delineate beauty, but truth, and at last truth will be beauty.' "[1]

His unique importance as a recorder of American civilization no less than his influence as chief of a school is fundamentally conditioned not by his genius as a reporter but by the humanity of his motives. When he advertised himself as a realist, he announced that realism was not a new

[1] "Mr. Howells' Latest Novels," in the *New England Magazine* (1890), 2(n. s.):243.

theory but only one that had never before so universally characterized literary endeavor, and that its assertions were simply that fidelity to experience was the essential condition of a great imaginative literature, and that the function of such a literature was to widen the bounds of human sympathy and make men better known to one another. "When realism becomes false to itself," he solemnly warned, "when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish too."[2] That was to say, even as classicism and romanticism perished—because they became faithless to fact. Thus, he proposed truth to the actual as an essential but not a final condition of art; and if he ascribed any intrinsic finality to veritism as a method it was because the course of literary history presented itself to his view not merely as a cyclic evolution but as an advance —a progress toward the conscious and exclusive employment of the data of human experience and the definite recognition of human values.

The subtleties of technique by which Howells realized his large and generous aims will be found to sustain a very close relation to them. This is a matter that his critics and readers have scarcely begun to understand. His insistence on impersonality and detachment as the authorial attitude, for example, has brought him a great deal of ill will from the critics and no end of miscomprehension from his readers. Even so sound a theorist and so discerning a commentator as Mr. W. C. Brownell rushed to the defence of Thackeray when Howells attacked him for his gross viola-

[2] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 15.

tions of this principle. Yet this is the very crux of the Howells technique, involving the abandonment of sentimentalism and satire as instruments of the moral novel, and thus serving more than anything else to make it an experiment in humanism. This is a sort of secret that yields itself only to the few but sincere readers who come to the Howells people without the common prepossession for "literary creations." I well remember my pleasure in an article by Mr. W. B. Trites in the *Forum* for February, 1913, in which he tells how this happened with him, and of his boyish difficulties with the characters of *The Minister's Charge,* which was read in his home:

"It interested us profoundly. We discussed Lemuel, Sewell, Statira, and the rest as though they had been real people. I remember still and starry nights of blood-curdling cold when I would be intensely annoyed by Mr. Howells' kindly treatment of the officious Mrs. Sewell—for, little boy that I was, I did not then perceive that for Mr. Howells to give the squarest of 'square deals' to a character does not inevitably mean that he upholds all that character's conduct—and I remember nights of wild wind and snow when Lemuel's stern aloofness shocked and displeased me, though at the same time I liked very much the lad's honor, his delicate pride."

Just as the practice of Howells gives a new and a more literal meaning to the somewhat banal precept that urges the "identification" of the author with common humanity, so the greatest, the most inclusive platitude of all—that which

exacts a general identification of the ideals of literature with the ideals of life—undergoes a stringent reinterpretation in his works. No modern master, save Tolstoi himself, has imagined a fusion of the aims and methods of literature with those of life so indissoluble as that upon which Howells was accustomed to insist. Literature is life; life, literature. This is what he had in mind when he entitled one of his later collections *Literature and Life* (1902). "If I did not find life in what professed to be literature," he explained in the foreword to that volume, "I disabled its profession, and possibly from this habit, now inveterate with me, I am never quite sure of life unless I find literature in it."

All the autobiographical works, especially the intimate and indispensable *Literary Passions,* are clear records of a growth from literature into life, from books into the world from which books are made—a kind of recapitulation of the literary movement with which their author became identified. This development, therefore, will be dominant in what little account appears here of Howells the Man. In this life, one of singular devotion to letters,—unwavering, unreserved devotion, almost from the cradle,—we shall see him born of a reading race, nourished on printer's ink, exulting in the very smell of paper, obsessed by the printed page, gradually awakening to a truer literary sense. We shall see him climb down from the "very high æsthetic horse" which he confesses having ridden, draw near to humanity, and learn "to see books from without the library." We shall observe him emerge from the eighteenth

century, his idol, Pope, crumbling in the dust; close his Thackeray, open his Tolstoi.

These autobiographical documents are happily as numerous as they are rich in interest and poetic grace. Besides *My Literary Passions* (1895), we have *A Boy's Town* (1890), one of the best of his books, which is in all essentials autobiography, thinly veiled by the use of the third person; *My Year in a Log Cabin* (1893), the most immediately engaging of the sketches of Ohio life; *Literary Friends and Acquaintance: a Personal Retrospect of American Authorship* (1900); and *Years of My Youth* (1916). Supplementary portraits of his father may be found in his introduction and conclusion to *Recollections of Life in Ohio, 1813–1840* (1895), and the initial essay ("The Country Printer") to *Impressions and Experiences* (1896). Furthermore, as we read the various essays and sketches, we come constantly upon bits of Cambridge, Boston, and New York that are to a measurable degree autobiographical. And this is equally true of the travel books, Italian, English, Spanish—all of them. The autobiographic manner is inveterate; everything is projected upon the background of the author's personality. When he contributes to a souvenir volume like *The Niagara Book* (1893), that personality is his contribution. Others deal forth history, humor, geology, description, according to their respective talents and interests; to him the most interesting object at Niagara, and the one he is most practiced in describing, is his own genial self. "Niagara, First and Last," accordingly and characteristically, becomes a chapter

toward an autobiography. These documents are unequalled in their blend of intimacy with solid dignity. Their inimitable modesty and humanness, their light play of self-depreciation, their whimsicality and air of making an adventure of everything—all these mask the record of a career in which the gods seem to have conspired to make nothing capricious, nothing inconsequent. The rigors of self-analysis are not merely shorn of the sense of futility that is often their accompaniment but are clothed in the glamour of poetry.

The habit of poetizing every-day existence and the tendency to introspection were evidently an inheritance with Howells. His great-grandmother once wrote to a daughter, upon some occasion of wilfulness, that she had "planted a dagger in her mother's heart," which led him to believe that this ancestress was not unacquainted with the romances of her day. It was from her, he thought, that his grandfather inherited a love of poetry, rather than from the great-grandfather, who, although a Friend by "convincement," must have had a somewhat worldly turn of mind, since he accumulated a fortune in the manufacture of flannels, which industry he founded in the pretty little Welsh town called The Hay, on the river Wye, and even made a prospecting trip to America.

The Grandfather Howells sailed for Boston in 1808 and, after peregrinations extending over New York, Virginia, and Ohio, with experiments in woolen milling and farming, settled in Hamilton, Ohio, as proprietor of a drug and book store,

the only book store in the place. He was a Methodist, and, says his grandson, "kept his affection for certain poets of the graver, not to say gloomier sort."

Religion and poetry were both more pervading influences in the life of William Cooper Howells, the father of William Dean. He suffered a season of skepticism, during which he vainly endeavored to get himself converted at camp meetings, finally espousing the doctrines of Swedenborg; and in that faith the children were carefully reared. It was an influence that dignified the home life, for there was nothing of fanaticism or of dogmatism in the elder Howells. He "despised austerity as something owlish" and "loved a joke almost as much as he loved a truth."[3] It did, however, cut the family off from church going, their Sundays being enlivened only by occasional visits of ministers and by readings from the Book of Worship and the *Heavenly Arcana.* The children had their "unwholesome spiritual pride in being different from their fellows in religion, but, on the other hand, it taught them not to fear being different from others if they believed themselves right."[4]

William Dean Howells was born on March 1, 1837, at Martin's Ferry, Ohio. Three years later the family moved to Hamilton, the "Boy's Town," where the father took charge of the *Intelligencer,* Hamilton's Whig newspaper; but since he was a staunch Henry Clay Whig and Hamilton was overwhelmingly Democratic, the

[3] *A Boy's Town* (1890), p. 14.
[4] *Ibid.,* p. 12.

Howells family did not enjoy any decided change in fortune. They remained as always, poor as the world reckons, but never in want.

The boy was particularly fortunate in his home life. His mother, Mary Dean Howells, although she suffered on account of her housewifely instincts, often failing to view the crudities of their material surroundings in a poetic light, "was always the best and tenderest mother, and her love had the heavenly art of making each child feel itself the most important, while she was partial to none." [5]

The dominant influence in forming his ideas, however, was his association with his father. They were the most congenial of companions, discussing literature and philosophy together as they went about their work. And although they differed in some matters of taste, the main traits are notably similar in father and son—the tendency to moralize and philosophize on any subject, always tempered by a fine strain of humor, the love of nature, even of the most common things in nature, and the sense of personal sympathy with men, even with the most common men. The son writes of his father:

"There was that in him which appealed to the better qualities of those he came in contact with, and made them wish to be as good as he thought them capable of being. He was not a poet in the artistic sense, but he was a poet in his view of life, the universe, creation, and his dream of it included man, as well as the woods and fields and their citizenship. His first emotion concerning

[5] *A Boy's Town* (1890), p. 21.

every form of life was sympathetic; he wished to get upon common ground with every person and with every thing.

"But he had the philosophic rather than the imaginative temperament, and what he sometimes thought he wished to do in literature and art (for he used, when young, to write verse and to draw), he would probably not have done if he had enjoyed all those opportunities and advantages which circumstances denied him."[6]

At the age of ten, William Dean went to work in the printing office. "This was not altogether because he was needed there, I dare say, but because it was part of his father's Swedenborgian philosophy that everyone should fulfill a use; I do not know that when the boy wanted to go swimming, or hunting, or skating, it consoled him much to reflect that the angels in the highest heaven delighted in uses; nevertheless, it was good for him to be of use, though maybe not so much use."[7]

In 1849 the family moved to Dayton, where the father had bought out the *Transcript*. This enterprise proved a total failure; and in the fall of the following year occurred another removal, this time to a log-cabin on the Little Miami River, with the idea of superintending the "never-accomplished transformation" of a saw-mill and a grist-mill into paper-mills. Of the rude but wholesome life there, Howells made one of his most delightful records, *My Year in a Log-Cabin.*

[6] Introduction to William Cooper Howells' *Recollections of Life in Ohio* (1895), p. IV.
[7] *A Boy's Town* (1890), p. 20.

The boys, at least, incited by their father, entered into pioneer life with a zest and a romantic enthusiasm that made hardship and privation attractive and stimulating.

The Island was a fascinating feature, appealing to the boyish imagination with a sense of mystery. "I do not know just how it is with a boy's world now," Howells once explained, "but at that time it was a very dangerous world. It was full of ghosts, for one thing, and it abounded in Indians on the war-path, and amateurs of kidnapping and murder of all sorts." Often the Island resounded to the war-cries of little savages, who had tutored themselves in the ways of crime and depredation with Howe's *Collections for the History of Ohio* and a book called *Western Adventure* from the Howells press at Dayton. A small gray pony was a favorite participant in these Indian dramas, and figured as an Arab charger when the Moors of Granada charged upon the Spanish camp with their iron-weed javelins.

There was work as well as play: the boys labored manfully at clearing the woods of black-walnut, oak, and hickory, and at planting corn, melons, and interminable rows of sweet-potatoes. In all, the father was comrade and inspiration. The son tells how famously they got on driving the cow out to the new home, "talking of the wayside things so beautiful in the beautiful autumnal day, all panoplied in the savage splendor of its painted leaves, and of the poems and histories so dear to the boy who limped barefooted by his father's side, with his eye on the cow and his mind on Cervantes and Shakespeare, on—

'The glory that was Greece,
And the grandeur that was Rome.'"[8]

It is not surprising that this lad of thirteen, who talked literature and philosophy with his father, should have grown up with a kind heart and a poetic imagination. Innumerable reminiscences, unmistakable in their sincerity, reveal the sensitive and reflective qualities of his temper. Of such is the memory of a rare moment that came to him when returning with his brother from an evening errand to some neighbor's:

"The shadows fell black from the trees upon the smooth sward, but every other place was full of the tender light in which all forms were rounded and softened; the moon hung tranced in the sky. We scarcely spoke in the shining solitude, the solitude which for once had no terrors for the childish fancy, but was only beautiful. This perfect beauty seemed not only to liberate me from the fear which is the prevailing mood of childhood, but to lift my soul nearer and nearer to the soul of all things in an exquisite sympathy. Such moments never pass; they are ineffaceable; their rapture immortalizes; from them we know that whatever perishes there is something in us that cannot die, that divinely regrets, divinely hopes."[9]

His introduction to literature was through the readings aloud in the family circle. That fine old custom was in the Howells family an institution, the Book of Worship and the *Heavenly Arcana* being displaced on week-day evenings by the Eng-

[8] *My Year in a Log-Cabin* (1893), p. 7.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

lish poets. His education was completed in the printing-office, the exactions of the trade standing him in lieu of school discipline.

His formal schooling was irregular in the extreme, and he set but little value on it. Few men have been so completely self-educated as he. His earliest memory was of a sort of dame school in a private house. Then he came under the tutelage of a master, who gave instruction in the basement of a church. Here he disgraced himself in spelling and arithmetic, but displayed a proficiency in geography which he long after confessed to have lost. As a reward for his attainments in that useful science, he received a history of Lexington, Massachusetts, which flattered him immensely, although he was vaguely disappointed in the book. At a private school known as the Academy, he studied what was then called philosophy, gathering valuable bits of information from the pictures, learning, for example, that "you could not make a boat go by filling her sail from bellows on board." [10] He did not see why. He later attended a district, or public school, where the teacher led the life of an executioner, and where he "lived in an anguish of fear." [11] It was here that he discovered the part called Prosody in the back of his grammar, and was delighted to find that "nature had not dealt so charily with him concerning the rules of prosody as the rules of arithmetic." [12]

Prosody was at once put into practice on subjects drawn from a book on Greek mythology.

[10] *A Boy's Town* (1890), p. 55.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 60.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

He even essayed a tragedy in the meter of *The Lady of the Lake,* one of the books his father had read aloud to the family. The plot, based upon the history of Julius Cæsar, as recounted by Goldsmith, featured the tyrannical teacher in the rôle of the great dictator, and was intended to afford the school-boy conspirators with an opportunity to wreak their vengeance in a sufficiently bloody manner. The piece, its author informs us, was never acted, owing to some difficulty about the hayloft.

His real masters, not only during boyhood but for long after, were the authors he came to know. His early reading was a kind of worship, the adoration of one god after another, the denial of one creed in order to subscribe to the next. "To give an account of one's reading," he begins *My Literary Passions,* "is in some sort to give an account of one's life";[13] and with him this is to give it in the truest, if not the only sort. The simple annals of his youth are made golden by books, ever more books. Only one who has felt in some measure the same transport can share with him his ecstasies over a box of imported volumes with their saffron-colored paper covers:

"The paper and the ink had a certain odor which was sweeter to me than the perfumes of Araby. The look of the type took me more than the glance of a girl, and I had a fever of longing to know the heart of the book, which was like a lover's passion."[14]

The grand passions of his boyhood were three:

[13] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 1.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Goldsmith, Cervantes, and Irving. Goldsmith's histories of Greece and Rome were precious mines of knowledge; *The Deserted Village* became an established favorite at the readings by the home fireside; and *The Vicar of Wakefield* remained for him "one of the most modern novels; that is to say, one of the best."[15] Goldsmith he finds endeared to us by his kindness and gentleness; these are what "make him our contemporary." "They are the source of all refinement," he explains, "and I do not believe that the best art of any kind exists without them."[16]

His affection for Cervantes was more ardent; and although he never gave us the biography he promised at the age of fifteen, the passion was a lasting one. "To this day," he confessed at the age of fifty-eight, "I cannot meet a Spanish man without clothing him in something of the honor and worship I lavished upon Cervantes when I was a child."[17] The Ingenious Gentleman of La Mancha was his Robinson Crusoe. He first heard the story from his father, who some time later presented him with the book, "the most wonderful and delightful book in the world,"[18] two stout little volumes in calf, destined to become his inseparable companions. In fact, he could remember no time during his boyhood when he was not reading them, and in his fifties he found that in what formed the essential greatness of the work, it seemed to him greater than ever. What forms its greatness is its "free and simple design,

[15] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 16.
[16] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 23.
[18] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

where event follows event without the fettering control of intrigue, but where all grows naturally out of character and conditions.'' [19]

The third of the great friends, Washington Irving, was endeared to him early in life through the charm of the Spanish books, the *Conquest of Granada* and *The Alhambra.* He was unable to share his father's amusement in the Knickerbocker *History of New York,* but he liked *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle.* The *Life of Goldsmith* he very much preferred to the more authoritative one by Forster, finding in it, so closely were those genial tempers allied, a ''deeper and sweeter sense of Goldsmith.'' [20]

In 1851, at the age of fourteen, he went to Columbus, his father being engaged there as a reporter of legislative proceedings, and became a compositor in the office of the *Ohio State Journal,* at a salary of four dollars a week. Meanwhile, he had been rapidly losing interest in having things read to him, coming to read more and more himself, so that he could let his fancy roam at leisure. He was beginning to read with a literary sense, that is, he explains, with a sense of the author. The characters in books were ceasing to affect him as real persons, although he had moments of intimacy with Ulysses—for he had at last read Pope's Homer. He had become acquainted with Scott's prose, too, by this time; but it never became a passion. One is tempted, associating his coldness toward Scott's romances

[19] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 26.
[20] *Ibid.,* p. 22.

with his devotion to *Don Quixote,* to pronounce the lad already a realist; but he assures us that his actual interest was in literature, not in life. "I was growing more literary," he insists, "and less human."

One may believe that for a boy of fourteen he was becoming very literary indeed, to prefer Pope's pastorals to *Ivanhoe.* The fact is, he became passionately enamoured of purling brooks, finny tribes, enameled meads, fleecy cares, feathered choirs, and aerial audiences. He essayed an infinite number of imitations, most of which never reached completion. "They all stopped somewhere about half way," he recollects. "My swains could not think of anything more to say, and the merits of my shepherdesses remained undecided." [21]

With all his later aversion to the romantic, Howells kept a fondness for the artificialities of the pseudo-romanticism of the classic period, which make no misleading pretensions to reality. However seriously the ardent swains and their Dresden china shepherdesses may have been taken in their day, the modern reader is not tempted to confuse their Arcadia with any quarter of the habitable globe. Like the extravaganza in the theatre, they may be relished, not as the pièce de résistance, but as dainty confections after the feast—by those who are, as Howells was wont to say, "in the joke of it." When he came to read Italian literature, he found Tasso's *Aminta* and the *Pastor Fido* of Guarini "divinely excellent artificialities." He was rather glad, furthermore,

[21] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 49.

to have had Pope for an idol, because in imitating him he could not help imitating his method of composition, which was essentially the method of intelligence. Further than this, he was glad to have acquainted himself with the poetry of Pope; for, he thought, with all that we may say against it, it was, as a mood of literature, the perfect expression of a mood of civilization.

After the one winter in Columbus, the family moved to Ashtabula, in the northeastern part of the state. It was the next removal, however, from Ashtabula to the county seat at Jefferson, that inaugurated for the literary youth a period of further enlightenment, a period from which he dated his interest in contemporary writers, and in periodicals, and during which he read his first literary criticism. His reading was turned in new directions largely through the influence of a series of personal friendships, some of them fortunately with men older than he, and of different tastes and ideals.

The first important event of this period was his suddenly, "without notice or reason,"[22] giving his heart to Shakespeare; and although Irving, Goldsmith, and Cervantes kept their old altars, the worship of the new divinity "went to heights and lengths that it had reached with no earlier idol."[23] He revelled with Falstaff in somewhat the personal intimacy of older days, before he had become literary; and he drew from the dramas many of the ideas he was to hold most persistently through later years, after he had become human.

[22] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 71.
[23] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

These are concerned chiefly with those qualities by which, in his droll way, he finally characterized modernity, that is to say, the qualities that make literature truly great. As Goldsmith is our contemporary by virtue of his inherent purity, as Cervantes is modern and realistic in his spacious form, unhampered by the trivialities of plot, so Shakespeare is one with us in his matchless individualizing of character, in his mingling of tears and joy, just as we find them mingled in life, and in the humor that pervades his work. Thus Howells describes his first impression of the reality of Shakespeare's world:

"There I found a world appreciable to experience, a world inexpressibly vaster and grander than the poor little affair that I had only known a small obscure corner of, and yet of one quality with it, so that I could be as much at home and citizen in it as where I actually lived. There I found joy and sorrow mixed, and nothing abstract or typical, but everything standing for itself and not for some other thing. Then, I suppose it was the interfusion of humor through so much of it, that made it all precious and friendly."[24]

The first literary criticism that he read was Lowell's; and he believed it implicitly, feeling that any question of it would be blasphemy. He obediently made his farewells to Pope, but he could not find it in his heart to like Spenser. For Chaucer he came to have a personal attachment, finding him very like Cervantes in "a certain sweet and cheery humanity."[25]

[24] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 77.
[25] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

He became acquainted with Dickens through an old English organ builder, and revelled with delight in the pages of that fascinating story-teller, who then "colored the parlance of the English-speaking race, and formed upon himself every minor talent attempting fiction." [26] His later reaction to the world of Dickens is thus recorded:

"The basis of his work is the whole breadth and depth of humanity itself. It is helplessly elemental, but it is not the less grandly so, and if it deals with the simpler manifestations of character, character affected by the interests and passions rather than the tastes and preferences, it certainly deals with the larger moods through them. . . . His view of the world and of society, though it was very little philosophized, was instinctively sane and reasonable, even when it was most impossible." [27]

From Dickens he gained a conception of essential democracy, presided over by a just and ever-watchful Providence, and it made him very happy to believe in such a world, even though he found it already contradicted by his own small experience. He wished it true, and he found it true "with that truth which is at the bottom of things." [28] "In that world of his," he goes on to relate, "in the ideal world, to which the real world must finally conform itself, I dwelt among the shows of things, but under a Providence that governed all things to a good end, and where neither wealth nor birth could avail against virtue or right." [28]

[26] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 93. [28] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

He was introduced to Thackeray also by the old organ builder, and by this time the literary sense, attained when he began to imitate Pope, had been completely acquired. In fact, his absorption in literature as divorced from life reached its culmination during the period of his infatuation with Thackeray—Thackeray, of all novelists "the most thoroughly and profoundly imbued with literature,"[29] who speaks in ink, as he expresses it, not in blood, as do Dickens and Tolstoi. "Literature, not life, was my aim," is Howells' confession, "and to reproduce it was my joy and my pride."[30] He is at some pains to analyze his fascination with Thackeray's superior airs toward both literature and life:

"What flatters the worldly pride in a young man is what fascinates him with Thackeray. With his air of looking down on the highest, and confidently inviting you to be of his company in the seat of the scorner, he is irresistible; his very confession that he is a snob, too, is balm and solace to the reader who secretly admires the splendors he affects to despise. His sentimentality is also dear to the heart of youth, and the boy who is dazzled by his satire is melted by his easy pathos. Then, if the boy has read a good many other books, he is taken with that abundance of literary turn and allusion in Thackeray; there is hardly a sentence but reminds him that he is in the society of a great literary swell, who has read everything, and can mock or burlesque life right and left from the literature always at his command. At the same time he feels his mastery, and is abjectly grateful

[29] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 137.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

to him in his own simple love of the good for his patronage of the unassuming virtues. It is so pleasing to one's vanity, and so safe, to be of the master's side when he assails those vices and foibles which are inherent in the system of things, and which one can contemn with vast applause so long as one does not attempt to undo the conditions they spring from."[31]

This boy did not know then, nor for long afterward, "that society, as we have it, was necessarily a sham,"[32] that snobbishness was not something it was possible to reach and cure by ridicule. "Now," he said later, "I know that so long as we have social inequality we shall have snobs . . . that it is futile to spurn them, or lash them for trying to get on in the world, and that the world is what it must be from the selfish motives that underlie our economic life."[33]

Among the contemporary poets, he never ceased to read and admire Longfellow. Browning and Tennyson he came to know at the age of eighteen, soon after the inevitable nervous breakdown, during which he consoled himself with being a martyr to literature. Tennyson became such another passion as Longfellow, but nothing of Browning except *The Ring and the Book* seems to have made any great appeal to him. "One need not question the greatness of Browning," he admits, "in owning the fact that the two poets of his day who pre-eminently voiced their generation were Tennyson and Longfellow; though Browning, like Emerson, is probably now more

[31] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 129.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 130.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 131.

modern than either.'' [34] Tennyson's *Maud,* which he read first, he thought indeed pre-eminently voiced his generation. ''I suppose,'' he continues, ''that at the time he wrote *Maud* he said more fully what the whole English-speaking race were then dimly longing to utter than any English poet who has ever lived.'' [34]

During the winter of 1856, Howells was in Columbus doing legislative reporting for the Cincinnati *Gazette*—and reading in the State Library. In the spring he refused an offer of a thousand dollars a year as city editor of the *Gazette,* fearing that his time for reading would be curtailed. This act of devotion was soon to cause him regret, when he came to realize the vital connection between literature and experience. For the hour of the supreme passion was at hand, the passion that was to liberate him forever. It was time for the Spanish idols to be placed in temporary retirement, their shrines occupied by German gods. He was at last to learn at the feet of Heine that his ideal of literature was false.

''I had supposed, with the sense at times that I was all wrong, that the expression of literature must be different from the expression of life; that it must be an attitude, a pose, with something of state or at least of formality in it; that it must be this style, and not that; that it must be like that sort of acting which you know is acting when you see it and never mistake for reality.'' [35] ''He undid my hands, which I had taken so much pains to tie behind my back, and he forever persuaded me

[34] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 155.
[35] *Ibid.,* p. 171.

that though it may be ingenious and surprising to dance in chains, it is neither pretty nor useful.''[36]

In 1859, Howells, as news editor of the *Ohio State Journal,* began the period of which he speaks as the heyday of his life. He met many people in Columbus society with whom he could talk literature to his full content; a world of amusement not hitherto enjoyed was thrown open to him; and his friendship with J. J. Piatt ripened into intimacy. It was in collaboration with Piatt that in the following year he formally began his literary career. But of more service in his advancement than the *Poems of Two Friends,* which they produced between them, was a campaign life of Lincoln. This work won for him the post of United States Consul to Venice, enabling him to spend the four years of our Civil War in that peaceful city, studying the Italian language and literature.

Before going abroad, he employed the immediate proceeds of his book in making a visit to the East, approaching New England by way of Niagara and the Canadian rivers and cities where he was to lay the scene of his first fictions. The young *littérateur* was by this time confirmed in the ways of hero-worship, and recalling how truly this was the Augustan age of New England letters, we can imagine the raptures with which this ''passionate pilgrim from the West approached his holy land.''[37] Thus in a few fervid strokes he sketches the group:

[36] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 174.
[37] *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), p. 18.

"Lowell was then in perfect command of those varied forces which will long, if not lastingly, keep him in memory as first among our literary men, and master in more kinds than any other American. Longfellow was in the fulness of his world-wide fame, and in the ripeness of the beautiful genius which was not to know decay while life endured. Emerson had emerged from the popular darkness which had so long held him a hopeless mystic, and was shining a lambent star of poesy and prophecy at the zenith. Hawthorne, the exquisite artist, the unrivalled dreamer, whom we still always liken this one and that one to, whenever this one or that one promises greatly to please us, and still leave without a rival, without a companion, had lately returned from his long sojourn abroad, and had given us the last of the incomparable romances which the world was to have perfect from his hand. Doctor Holmes had surpassed all expectations in those who most admired his brilliant humor and charming poetry by the invention of a new attitude if not a new sort in literature. The turn that civic affairs had taken was favorable to the widest recognition of Whittier's splendid lyrical gift; and that heart of fire, doubly snow-bound by Quaker tradition and Puritan environment, was penetrating every generous breast with its flamy impulses, and fusing all wills in its noble purpose. Mrs. Stowe, who far outfamed the rest as the author of the most renowned novel ever written, was proving it no accident or miracle by the fiction she was still writing."[38]

Introducing the timid pilgrim to this renowned circle, Lowell, although not yet at the zenith of his

[38] *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), p. 10.

prestige, played the good angel.[39] He had already accepted some of Howells' verses for the *Atlantic,* after holding them long enough to ascertain that they were not translations from Heine, and was later to open for him the columns of the *North American Review.* His welcome and his friendship through succeeding years not only color the "Studies of Lowell" but shed their glow over the whole of Howells' retrospect of American authorship.

It is saying a great deal to suggest that in a gallery of portraits such as compose the *Literary Friends and Acquaintance,* Lowell's is the most distinguished. "The White Mr. Longfellow"[40] is certainly a more beautiful figure, but there is a charm of intimacy in which without intrusion we are made to see Lowell with pipe and slippers, in which without gossip he is almost literally made to live. In this characteristic lies the peculiar felicity of the book as a whole, and I wonder whether we have another volume of literary reminiscence so happy in its kind. The ego looms large; yet was ever egoism so modest, so faithful to its illuminative purpose? And was candor ever so delicate, so fearful of conveying the unintended slight or giving a wound? One hazards nothing in predicting for such a record a life at least as

[39] For a selection from correspondence showing Lowell's sometimes undiscriminating fondness for his protégé, see an article on "Lowell and Howells" in *Harper's Weekly* (1902), 46:101.

[40] "Something that Björnstjerne Björnson wrote to me when he was leaving America after a winter in Cambridge, comes nearer suggesting Longfellow than all my talk. The Norsemen, in the days of their stormy and reluctant conversion, used always to speak of Christ as the White Christ, and Björnson said in his letter, 'Give my love to the White Mr. Longfellow.' "—*Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), p. 208.

long as there shall be any interest in the men who made New England great in our literature.

Before linking his destiny with the patriciate of Boston and Cambridge, however, he lived the Italian years. Of these, he has given account in the chapter "Roundabout to Boston" of the *Literary Friends and Acquaintance,* and in *My Literary Passions,* but chiefly, of course, in the golden book —*Venetian Life.* Notwithstanding the fascination of Dante and mediæval Italy, his interest turned more and more toward the observation of men and books of the day. And, discovering the weakness of Italian fiction as a record of contemporary life, he devoted himself eagerly to the drama. Of all the dramatists, he loved Goldoni best, and never ceased to regard him as the first of the realists; for although he lived in the eighteenth century, he lived to fight hand-to-hand with eighteenth-century romanticism. "Because I have loved the truth in art above all things," he says, "I fell instantly and lastingly in love with Carlo Goldoni." [41]

Three weeks after his return from abroad he came to New York with the intent to resume journalism. He wrote editorials for different papers, mostly for the *Times* and the *Tribune,* and some time in November accepted a salaried position on the *Nation,* which had been using his Italian material. The following year (1866) he went to Boston as assistant editor to James T. Fields on the *Atlantic Monthly.* He was evidently given a large hand in the conduct of the magazine, and on the retirement of Fields, in 1872, became, at the

[41] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 208.

age of thirty-five, its editor-in-chief. Each of these years of editorial promotion was signalized by a corresponding advance in his reputation as an author. The success of *Venetian Life* in book form (1866) was as instant as it has been lasting, and the reception accorded *Their Wedding Journey,* his first novel, in 1872, determined his career as a writer of fiction. Continuing with the magazine, he won not only the especial devotion of the young but the esteem of nearly all the major talents of the day, until, as Thomas Wentworth Higginson remarked in 1879,[42] his leading contemporaries were his contributors, although he had already as assistant editor established the friendships that were to be lifelong with Henry James and Mark Twain, forming with them what the English reviewers called a mutual admiration society.

In 1881, after fifteen years of service, he resigned his editorship to Thomas Bailey Aldrich in order to devote himself exclusively to the writing of fiction, accepting a yearly salary from James R. Osgood, who disposed of the serial rights mostly to the *Century.* After the failure of Osgood, he joined the Harper forces, and in 1885 moved to New York. His contract with Messrs. Harper stipulated fiction only, but with some persuasion he was induced to take charge of "The Editor's Study" (1886), in which he waged his six years' critical warfare on romanticism. His contract terminated, he became for a short time editor of the *Cosmopolitan* (1892), but eventually

[42] *Short Studies of American Authors* (Ed. 1906), p. 32. N. Y., Longmans, Green.

reunited his fortunes with the house of Harper. They remained his official publishers, though he occasionally serialized a story elsewhere; and from December, 1900, until the time of his death he conducted the "Easy Chair" department in their magazine. New York was the home of his later years, although there were periods of travel and residence abroad, summers in New England, and winters in Florida; and in New York he died on May 11, 1920.

The literary passions of later years were for contemporary writers, largely for contemporary novelists dedicated to realism. At the time he made his book of worship, Howells wished that he could call back some of the time he had squandered on the classics; his counsel was to give no time to old literature except that of the greatest masters. All that one can get from minor writers, he maintained, can be had in fuller measure and better quality from the few really great ones. Preference for the second-rate he regarded as mainly an affectation of persons wishing to distinguish themselves from the herd. Schools and periods he thought should be left to the scholar, whose business is concerned with them; and he took occasion to remind the scholar that reading done in order to become familiar with a period is literally a business, a professional duty, in no way concerned with the love of literature, which must be a passion, not a duty. "Read the old masters," he advised, "and let their schools go, rather than neglect any possible master of your own time. Above all, I would not have any one read an old author merely that he might not be ignorant of

him; that is most beggarly, and no good can come of it.'' [43]

In his extended review of the novel in English, the two volumes of *Heroines of Fiction* (1901), he finds it to have arrived in the hands of Jane Austen at a perfection beyond which it has never gone. George Eliot he pronounces the greatest talent after the Divine Jane, and one with whom it is useless to compare any of her contemporaries except Hawthorne, or any who come after except Thomas Hardy.

Howells' salient attitudes in his survey of Continental fiction are two: a reserve that amounts to coldness toward the French realists and an allegiance that verges on extravagance to the Russian. To numerous Scandinavian, Spanish, and Italian novelists he has played the admiring brother, especially feeling his kinship with the Spaniards and delighting in introducing them to his American readers as masters. In fighting romanticism, he took his weapons from their critics, Palacio-Valdés and Emilia Pardo-Bazán, rather than from the great warriors of France, his opinions of them in either field of endeavor echoing his youthful reverence for the countrymen of Cervantes.

The imperfection of Howells' French sympathies is the more remarkable in that he himself aimed at a kind of experimental novel and was in all matters of literary handling more French than English or Spanish or Russian. To Zola, indeed, he gives some very high praise, pronouncing him the most moral of the French novelists—the near-

[43] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 228.

est the Russians in the serious handling of his material—and acknowledging his "epic greatness." But Balzac, whom such diverse moderns as Henry James and George Moore have revered as "the master of us all" and the one who has "shown greater wings of mind than any artist that ever lived,"—Balzac he approaches as he does Thackeray, with distended and quivering nostrils, sniffing the air for the first scent of the "romanticistic," a very watch-dog of realism. And he was finally capable of pairing him off with Bulwer![44]

What he failed to discover in the French realists he found in the Russian. He was impressed by the conscientiousness with which they handled their themes, by the peculiar compulsion under which they detailed all aspects of human nature with equal fidelity and with equal earnestness. The awful seriousness of their quest for truth saddened while it inspired him. His "gay American horizons were bathed in the vast melancholy of the Slav, patient, agnostic, trustful."[45] Yet it was with a "joyful astonishment"[46] at the perfection of art that he read Turgeniev—with a rapture inexpressible. "I cannot describe the satisfaction his work gave me," he exclaims; "I can only impart some sense of it, perhaps, by saying that it was like a happiness I had been waiting for all my life, and now it had come, I was richly content forever."[47]

[44] *Heroines of Fiction* (1901), I, p. 125.
[45] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 231.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 230.
[47] *Ibid.*, p. 223.

Having pronounced the dramatic method of Turgeniev "as far as art can go,"[48] he was to know a method that seemed to transcend art altogether. The last, the supreme passion was for Tolstoi, whom he read in 1886. It seemed to him unbelievable that Turgeniev, with the transparency of his style and his perfect concealment of artifice, had not said the last word æsthetically—in everything relating to expression. But here was no artifice to conceal; here was a style of equal transparency divested even of personality, quite *without a manner*—at least Howells professed himself unable to describe Tolstoi's manner. "There are plenty of novelists to tell you that their characters felt and thought so and so," he explains, "but you have to take it on trust; Tolstoi alone makes you know how and why it was so with them and not otherwise. This is the only trait I can put my hand on, this ability to show men inwardly as well as outwardly."[49]

It was naturally an ethic rather than an æsthetic influence that Tolstoi exercised over him, coming so late in life, and as such was a confirmatory rather than a formative one. He confesses that he no longer had any desire to imitate the methods of another, but is overcome by gratitude in estimating how much he was helped in the other way. This, he declares, was "as much as one merely human being can help another."[50] "He has been to me the final consciousness, which he speaks of

[48] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 229.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 254.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 250.

so wisely in his essay on Life. . . . The supreme art in literature had its highest effect in making me set art forever below humanity." [51]

In so far as he withholds his admiration from any of Tolstoi's work, it is in truth to his conviction that the greatest art together with the greatest moral power is in allowing things to stand for what they are and not for something else. He regrets that the master's moral sense can overpower his artistic sense. He detects the false note in the exegesis to *The Kreutzer Sonata,* which would apply "to marriage the lesson of one evil marriage," [52] as surely as he feels the power of the drama unglossed in *Anna Karénina.* And when Tolstoi casts his precious dramatic gift to the winds, lapsing into allegory, when his tales become parables, Howells asserts that the simple pathos of Policoushka, the peasant conscript, is worth more to him than myriads of parables. "The Death of Ivan Ilyitch, the Philistine worldling," he insists, "will turn the hearts of many more from the love of the world than such pale fables of early Christian life as Work While Ye Have the Light." [52]

It remains to close the account of Howells' long discipleship with his tribute to his last master, which I cannot refrain from giving entirely in his own words, since he has compressed it into a passage as notable as any to be found in the entire range of his writings:

"Tolstoi awakens in his reader the will to be a man; not effectively, not spectacularly, but sim-

[51] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 258.
[52] *Ibid.,* p. 256.

ply, really. He leads you back to the only true ideal, away from that false standard of the gentleman, to the Man who sought not to be distinguished from other men, but identified with them, to that Presence in which the finest gentleman shows his alloy of vanity, and the greatest genius shrinks to the measure of his miserable egotism. I learned from Tolstoi to try character and motive by no other test, and though I am perpetually false to that sublime ideal myself, still the ideal remains with me, to make me ashamed that I am not true to it. Tolstoi gave me heart to hope that the world may yet be made over in the image of Him who died for it, when all Cæsar's things shall be rendered unto Cæsar, and men shall come into their own, into the right to labor and the right to enjoy the fruits of their labor, each one master of himself and servant to every other. He taught me to see life not as a chase of a forever impossible personal happiness, but as a field for endeavor toward the happiness of the whole human family; and I can never lose this vision, however I close my eyes, and strive to see my own interest as the highest good. He gave me new criterions, new principles, which, after all, were those that are taught us in our earliest childhood, before we have come to the evil wisdom of the world. As I read his different ethical books, What to Do, My Confession, and My Religion, I recognized their truth with a rapture such as I have known in no other reading, and I rendered them allegiance, heart and soul, with whatever sickness of the one and despair of the other. They have it yet, and I believe they will have it while I live." [53]

Viewing at large the course of Howells' literary

[53] *My Literary Passions* (1895), pp. 250-252.

passions,—from the great trio of his boyhood to this last and greatest of them all,—we see his deference to masters but gradually outgrown; but we do observe the acquisition of a guiding principle that operates in the selection of the masters and dictates the terms of allegiance to them, the realistic principle to which he was awakened under the influence of Heine and by which he thenceforth judged books more and more according to their truth or their falsity to life. I like to dwell upon the early supremacy of Cervantes, significant beyond the affection for Goldsmith and Irving, to whom he was allied on the temperamental rather than the philosophic side of his nature, and lasting long after he had, as Lowell expressed it, sweat the Heine out of his bones. There is a fitness of sentiment in the circumstance that made *Don Quixote,* with its spiritual, not to speak of its formal and technical leanings toward modernity, his *Robinson Crusoe,* his *Ivanhoe,* his *Arabian Nights*—a fanciful symbol of his own soul's adventures toward an ideal that should reconcile and fuse the æsthetic passion with the ethical, of his deliverance from Pope into the hands of Heine, from literary formalism and pseudo-romance to the poetry, the humor, the poignant sadness of our familiar world.

The period of his infatuation with Pope and Thackeray was a time of subservience to literosity so complete as to presage revolt; but thereafter it was no less inevitable that Heine should be himself supplanted. This was not accomplished in the spectacular manner of revolt, but happened when the young Howells, who gave himself to the

cultivation of an ironic turn, quick though less ghastly than Heine's, in his prose and the reflection of a brooding sadness in his verse, acquired a more personal seizure of the poetry and the matter-of-fact in things, and a subtler mastery of the art of disillusion. For Heine represents with him less an immediate liberation than an ideal of artistic freedom, an ideal that he realized for himself later and in which he was more and more confirmed by contact with the Continental realists until in Tolstoi he came at once upon an artist of seeming finality and a philosophic mind large enough to accommodate and give abiding-place to all his ideas.

Howells' problems, religious, political, and social, are habitually reduced to such an aspect of simple humanity and justice that their solutions, if attainable at all in our selfish world, must be sought in some such condition as the primitive Christian brotherhood preached by Tolstoi. In so far as he suffered discouragement or leaned toward pessimism, it was that he could not follow the sublime consistency of the master's way, that with an ideal end so similar he found so little virtue in any immediate means, that the brotherhood of man being still beyond the bluest distance, he was satisfied with nothing less. The abundance of his experimental data on communal living, for example, only convinced him that the democratic spirit was an inward one and the slow fruit of racial enlightenment. His belief was that civilization had no reasonable line of development but toward democracy, and that the world was actually becoming less selfish and more a brotherhood

because men were coming to know each other better. His faith was always in something inwardly good in man, something that now and again he would call divine. His theology was of works rather than of faith; and although the clergymen of the eighties do not make lovely figures in his novels, he was in sympathy with them in their emphasis on Christ as a life. In the sphere of personal morals he was especially indebted to Tolstoi. The supreme truth that fiction is potent to reveal was to his mind the futility of the chase after a forever impossible personal happiness; and *Anna Karénina* is its Bible.

Much as he learned from the Russians, Howells, except for an occasional similarity to Turgeniev, did not imitate them. His methods are more Gallic than Slavic, while his themes more often parallel those of Jane Austen and George Eliot than those of Tolstoi or Dostoievsky. He was above all things else true to himself, to the American background he loved, and despite the Celt in him, to our common Anglo-Saxon heritage of substance. Formative forces conspired to make him democratic and humanitarian rather than individualistic, national rather than cosmopolitan, and, in his sense of the facts of life, realistic rather than romantic. The result, as we have it in the Howells novel at its greatest, is above anything else of its kind *American;* and above everything American of comparable excellence, *humane.*

Finally, to characterize the Howells works as American and humane is to describe only the gross attributes of writings remarkable in their

special tone or atmosphere. But I do not know that one can define this atmosphere or the personality from which it emanates. Its clearest distinction lies perhaps in the combination of a rigorously impersonal method, shunning equally sentimentality and satire, with an intensely personal manner and with irrepressible humor; so that the very acuity of the observation he brings to bear upon the human scene seems to condition the romance and diversion he extracts from it. The shrewder, the more dispassionate his scrutiny, the greater his power to charm, to touch, or to amuse; the more transparent his fact, the more keenly he makes his reader feel the sentiment, the poetry, the humor, or the sermon that resides in it—and, if we are to believe him, nowhere else. There is something whimsical in this and something gay; but *genial* is a simpler and better word for his most habitual and most fortunate mood. Geniality is the *qualité maîtresse*. And that forbids him the field of satire. His ventures in that direction all have the quality of his father's characteristic rebuke on a certain occasion when Grandfather Howells had reported some juvenile indecorum: "Boys, consider yourselves soundly thrashed."

## II

### HIS CONCEPTION OF CRITICISM

HOWELLS united in himself the offices of critic and creator to an extraordinary degree. Few novelists have divulged at any such length the ideals and methods of their art, and still fewer critics have written novels to illustrate their theories. The critical office, indeed, he affected to despise, and by far the greater number of his commentators have taken him at his word. They have thus escaped the danger of judging his work too exclusively with reference to its intention, of emphasizing the moralist and social philosopher rather than the artist. But they have fallen pretty generally into the contrary extreme, and have made him out a virtuoso without a message, a delicate and wholly superficial artist, a faultless delineator of tea-parties. Howells' confession of faith demands examination chiefly then because of the illumination it throws upon his own work. But further than this, it furnishes an explicit guide in determining his status in his school, and a key to his influence upon the younger generation. For his influence on realism in America, owing to the generally authoritative character of his position, was vastly augmented by the particular circumstance that made him a critical authority. The present chapter, however,

will go still further and deal with the theory underlying his criticism, and is naturally written on the assumption that the criticism intrinsically is not a negligible part of his contribution to our letters.

The documents of importance begin with the papers on Italian subjects, supplemented by articles and reviews on his New England friends and acquaintance, which made their appearance in the *North American Review* during the sixties. His regular book notices in the *Atlantic Monthly* begin with the June number of 1866 and extend to the issue for January, 1881, and all the while he was contributing other matter to his own journal as well as to the *North American*. During the year following his retirement from the *Atlantic* to devote himself more exclusively to the writing of fiction, came his first really audible and unmistakable revolt against the complacent régime of the established English novelists, the essay on Henry James in the *Century* for November, 1882. Richardson, Fielding, Dickens, and Thackeray, all four were struck at a blow—in one sentence. It is all very mild to us now, who understand that these great novelists are not perfect models of artistry. But in those days such heterodoxy precipitated an avalanche of indignant protest. Three years later the battle began in earnest with Howells quartered in the "Editor's Study" of *Harper's Magazine*. These papers extend from January, 1886, to March, 1892, his occupancy of the "Easy Chair" dating from December, 1900, to the time of his death. Meanwhile, he contributed voluminously to other

magazines, his reviews in the *North American* being known to all who interest themselves in contemporary literature.

Fortunately, the best of his work has already been sifted and garnered for Messrs. Harper. The collections include: *Modern Italian Poets: Essays and Versions* (1887), his only comprehensive and systematic treatment of a literary period; *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), the heart of the "Editor's Study" discussion of these two topics; *My Literary Passions* (1895), the invaluable literary autobiography which appeared originally in *The Ladies' Home Journal* from December, 1892, to October, 1893; *Literary Friends and Acquaintance: a Personal Retrospect of American Authorship* (1900); *Heroines of Fiction* (1901), two volumes collected from *Harper's Bazaar,* May, 1900, to October, 1901, a survey of English and American fiction; *Literature and Life: Studies* (1902); *My Mark Twain: Reminiscences and Criticisms* (1910); and *Imaginary Interviews* (1910).

In addition to those books of which Howells is sole author, the student of his works will take account of the great number in which he has collaborated, mostly by way of critical or appreciative introduction. His connection with the miscellanies and collections in a critical capacity began as early as 1860, the year of his first publications in book form, and old age did not weary him in this business, for which he was extraordinarily gifted. Those which by all means deserve a reading are the introductions to Mary A. Craig's translation of Verga's *The House by the*

*Medlar-Tree* (1890), Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1893), Galdós' *Doña Perfecta* (1896), and Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896). Among introductions more purely appreciative may be cited that to Stuart Merrill's exquisite translation of *Pastels in Prose* (1890), selected from the French, and those to the various volumes of "Harper's Novelettes"; although an exception should be made in favor of the significant foreword to *Southern Lights and Shadows* (1907) in that series.

Another general division of the critical comment, one to be used with appropriate caution, of course, is constituted by the fiction itself. There are few of his novels in which some of the characters are not excessively given to conversation on literary topics. It is unnecessary to point out the danger involved in crediting Howells with opinions held by his characters, but the fact is that he used the novel deliberately as a brief for realism. Consequently, there is unusual justification for illustrating his philosophy of fiction from the dialogue as well as from the structure of his stories.

The first question pertinently put to any critic is the excessively worn one: "What of the function of criticism? What is the use of writing books about books? That is, what do you conceive to be your own status in the world of letters?" Opinions on this matter are widely at variance, ranging from the most depreciatory to the most exalted. From time to time we find reviewers who, under cover of anonymity, confess their unworthiness of any sort of literary standing.

Others, of whom Wordsworth, unmindful of his own distinguished service, is a classic example, merely stigmatize as an inglorious employment this writing of books about books. One American writer, Mr. H. C. Vedder, resenting such disparagement of "unoriginal" work, asserts his position to be that of a respectable middle-man, a purveyor to the public of literary merchandise.[1] So great a critic as Matthew Arnold, while holding the function of criticism an essential one in establishing an order of ideas, in creating an intellectual and spiritual atmosphere indispensable for the highest type of creative work, thought: "Everybody, too, would be willing to admit, as a general proposition, that the critical faculty is lower than the inventive."[2] But not everybody would, since many find that as a general proposition the matter is scarcely intelligible. John M. Robertson, for example, refuses to allow a general distinction between the critical and the creative, pointing out the propensity of the latter term to dwindle on definition to the mere invention of stories about imaginary persons; and Rémy de Gourmont, in his *Promenades Littéraires,* maliciously inquires why Taine should be called a critic and Octave Feuillet a creator. And, indeed, the best critical intelligence of our time and country seems to proceed upon the Nietzschian dictum, "To value is to create." Mr. Paul Elmer More has said substantially that; and Mr. Spingarn has been lecturing on the unity of

[1] *American Writers of To-day* (1894), p. 62.
[2] "The Function of Criticism," in *Essays in Criticism,* First Series (1910), p. 3.

genius and taste; and Mr. W. C. Brownell in his already classic brochure on *Criticism* has treated his art as cognate with the other arts, plastic and literary.

So it is disconcerting at the outset to find Howells not merely clinging as does Matthew Arnold to a traditional distinction, not merely lamenting as does Wordsworth the waste of time and energy expended in "uncreative" labor, but declining to enforce the claims of a respectable middle-man, ranging himself to all appearances with that ignoble class first mentioned. We had expected hostility toward the variety of criticism stigmatized as "academic," but we find ourselves plunged into a wholesale arraignment of "the vested interests of criticism," which too long have been permitted to insult and browbeat the young writer. So far from establishing the "current of true and fresh ideas" of which Matthew Arnold speaks so beautifully and so confidently, ideas with which the creative genius may deal divinely, "presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations, making beautiful works with them," [3] criticism, we find, "has condemned whatever was, from time to time, fresh and vital in literature; it has always fought the new good thing in behalf of the old good thing; it has invariably fostered the tame, the trite, the negative." [4] So far from endeavoring "to see the object as in itself it really is," [5] "criticism does

[3] "The Function of Criticism," in *Essays in Criticism*, First Series (1910), p. 5.
[4] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 46.
[5] "The Function of Criticism," in *Essays in Criticism*, First Series (1910), p. 6.

not inquire whether a work is true to life, but tacitly or explicitly compares it with models, and tests it by them."[6] It actually "cannot conceive of the original except as the abnormal."[7] So far from its being the inevitable precursor of true creative activity, we learn that: "If literary art travelled by any such road as criticism would have it go, it would travel in a vicious circle, and would arrive only at the point of departure."[8] To come at once upon the worst, the critic is a parasite on literature, whose "only excuse for being is that somebody else has been."[8] Indeed, he is formally likened to a caterpillar:

"The critic exists because the author first existed. If books failed to appear, the critic must disappear, like the poor aphis or the lowly caterpillar in the absence of vegetation. These insects may both suppose that they have something to do with the creation of vegetation; and the critic may suppose that he has something to do with the creation of literature; but a very little reasoning ought to convince alike aphis, caterpillar, and critic that they are mistaken."[8]

How is it, one hastens to ask, that literature flourishes to-day more luxuriantly than ever before with this canker at its heart? It is because, while the parasite may fatten itself, may even inflict pain, it is utterly powerless to effect any lasting injury upon the vigorous life-stalk that sustains it. It wounded John Keats, hurt him cruelly, but kill him it did not. Wordsworth and

[6] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 47.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Browning were treated barbarously, but how long was their fame delayed? "Every literary movement," Howells maintains, "has been violently opposed at the start, and yet never stayed in the least, or arrested, by criticism; every author has been condemned for his virtues, but in no wise changed by it."[9] Although the trite, the conventional, the negative have always been championed, such is the vitality of literature that always the fresh, the novel, and the positive have survived.

As a piece of self-arraignment, a case of Howells *versus* Howells, this nihilistic conception of the function of criticism has no great interest, since a man may choose whether or not he will take himself seriously in any given office. The end of this aspect of the matter is that Howells may ask us in vain to believe that he labored devotedly throughout a long lifetime in a cause he regarded as futile and unworthy of his talents. The argument repays attention, however, for the excellence of his handling and for the additional piquancy it derives from the purity of his motives. This confusion of the antics of a certain type of critic with criticism as a genre of literature, as a creative spiritual force, which has commonly commended itself to disappointed and injured authors, is not to be observed every day in the skilful employ of a master, and one concerned solely for the comfort of others. Moreover, it is perhaps not superfluous to call attention from time to time to the fact that while it may be true that every literary movement has been violently opposed at the start, it is at least equally true that every

[9] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 39.

literary movement has been violently championed at the start, and that the domain of literature has no monopoly of the very human condition that the conservative forces have a certain advantage in the strife. To maintain that "just as many good novels, poems, plays, essays, sketches, would be written if there were no such thing as criticism in the literary world, and no more bad ones,"[10] is not very different from saying that the political history of the race would be what it has been if no one had recorded a thought on the subject of politics. John M. Robertson (although he was not so seriously perturbed over the caterpillar as over the botanist, with whom we shall have presently to deal) has taken pains to remind our critic of the immense influence wielded by Pope, Boileau, Lessing, Voltaire, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and others.[11] He might well have carried the list back to Aristotle, who appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* not many years ago as an authority on the short-story.

The influence of criticism on the immediate success or failure of a work is a different matter, and one on which it is much easier to agree with Howells. No phenomenon, he points out, is more common than the uselessness of criticism against a book "that strikes the popular fancy," unless it be its uselessness in behalf of a book that "does not generally please."[12] Indeed, we have seen the novels of J. W. De Forest slip quietly and certainly into oblivion, in spite of all Howells'

[10] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 47.
[11] *Essays Toward a Critical Method* (1889), p. 144.
[12] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 40.

pleading and cajoling, and on the other hand, those of M. Pierre Loti triumph steadily and surely over the unanimous damnation of the Parisian press. This means that the reviewer is not a dictator, and cannot arbitrate on the basis of his personal preferences. It does not mean, one may be sure, that he might as well be silent as speak the word for true merit. Émile Faguet, who is quite in accord with Howells on this point, finds therein great cause for rejoicing, exclaiming: "Pour mon compte, j'en suis enchanté. J'aurais des scrupules de conscience terribles si je croyais que je pusse avoir une influence sur le succès ou l'insuccès d'un ouvrage. Car, dans ce cas, je ferais un assez villain métier. C'est le pain que j'oterais de la bouche de l'auteur qui aurait eu le malheur de ne pas me plaire. Ce serait abominable."[13] The French critic is able to view the seeming disestablishment of his vocation with a light heart because he entertains no delusion that his particular literary form is the menial of another. "La critique est un genre littéraire comme un autre," he maintains, "et voilà tout."[14]

Even in this matter, however, our critic exaggerates his negation. Mrs. Gertrude Atherton, who, I take it, has not knowingly credited him with any good thing, holds him largely responsible for the "craze" or "fad" for Russian novels in this country. She is reported as saying: "Whatever any one says in a widely read maga-

[13] "Sur Cette Question: Quelle est l'influence morale du critique?" in *Propos Littéraires*, I (1902), p. 3.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

zine carries a great deal of weight. I remember that I used to read whatever he suggested. I read some of the Spanish novelists whom he praised so highly. But," she added, "I never have been able to read his own novels."[15]

Given such a negative conception as Howells seems to hold of the function and influence of criticism, an inquiry as to its methods and criteria must seem superfluous if not impertinent. The logical method would be the immediate abandonment of the pernicious practice. Yet when we ask him point blank if critics like himself fulfil no use in this world, he replies, "I should not like to think that, though I am not quite ready to define our use."[16] He admits that critics have an obvious historical use, and that æsthetic criticism may perhaps have a "cumulative and final effect,"[17] though its efforts at directly affecting the course of literature are foreordained to futility. And a further inquiry proves that his notions of critical method do in fact display the same general tendency as his practice, a tendency toward the perfecting, not the abandoning of the art.

The general method of criticism, Howells believed, should be in a word the method of science. Its aim should be to "place a book in such a light that the reader shall know its class, its function, its character."[18] Its purpose is "to ascertain

[15] Joyce Kilmer, "An Interview with Gertrude Atherton," reprinted from the New York *Times* in the *Editor* (1915), 42:299. See also "Why Have We Not More Great Novelists?" in *Current Literature* (1908), 44:159, and Mrs. Atherton's article, "Why Is American Literature Bourgeois?" in the *North American Review* (1904), 177:771.

[16] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 39.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

facts and traits of literature,"[19] to discover principles, and to report them. Criticism which fondly imagines that it can give *laws* must "altogether reconceive its office."[20] "It must reduce this to the business of observing, recording, and comparing; to analyzing the material before it, and then synthetizing its impressions."[20] It is a science, of course, as far removed as possible from Brunetière's evolution of genres. It studies the forms of life rather than literary types. The ideal critic will know life primarily, and will value literature as a record of life simply. His sole criterion will be its faithfulness to the life from which it springs. He cannot give law, he will not dictate law; and, in fact, law cannot be given to the creative mind, only to the imitative. He will be a "gentle, dispassionate, scientific student of current literature who never imagines that he can direct literature, but realizes that it is a plant which springs from the nature of a people, and draws its forces from their life, that its root is in their character, and that it takes form from their will and taste."[21]

In so far as this is a plea for dispassionate criticism, and in so far as it discountenances the subjection of a work of art to æsthetic law external to it, it is quite in accord with the critical intelligence of our time. To this extent, and just to this extent, it meets the requirements suggested by Mr. Brownell for a criterion free and eclectic and at the same time reasonable. Such a crite-

[19] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 38.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 47.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 55.

rion, in Mr. Brownell's words, is one "which is untrammeled by precedent and unmoved by change; which is strict without rigidity, and seeks the law of any performance within and not outside it; which demands no correspondence to any other concrete, but only to the appropriate abstract; which, in fact, substitutes for a concrete ideal a purely abstract one of intrinsic applicability to the matter in hand." [22] There is, however, one important omission in Howells' theoretic statement, the critic's duty to judge the artistic performance.

We have seen what his image of the parasite led him to, and here his fondness for botanical analogy has again betrayed him. Forgetful of the figurative nature of his conception of literature as a plant springing from the life of a people, and oblivious of distinctions between the biological and the social sciences, he identifies the dispassionateness of the ideal critic with that of the botanist in the presence of his specimens, and arrives at a confusion of critical judgment with the law-giving that Mr. Brownell condemns. The ideal critic, who, after the manner of the botanist, makes it his business to discover and report, will also realize, we are told, that "there is a measure of the same absurdity in his trampling on a poem, a novel, or an essay that does not please him as in the botanist's grinding a plant underfoot because he does not find it pretty . . . that it is his business rather to identify the species and then explain how and where the specimen is imperfect

[22] *Criticism* (1914), p. 61.

and irregular.'' [23] Here again, John M. Robertson, the most serious and penetrating critic of this phase of Mr. Howells' work, has taken great but maybe not altogether needless pains in exposing the fallacy, incidentally pointing out the inconsistency of the last phrase in the passage quoted. In this matter, as in the case of the caterpillar, one has simply to make an end by going to Howells' actual practice, where he may be found doing nothing if not judging, and sometimes, it must be confessed, giving a very accurate imitation for one of his gentle nature, of trampling and grinding underfoot. That is to say, he treats a book or a literary idea which he regards as poisonous in an utterly different manner from the way a botanist would treat a poisonous flower.

Howells' arraignment of criticism as it is practiced is on the two general charges of dishonesty and superstition. The first of these vices is displayed in that criticism which judges a writer without reference to his aims, which essays the offensive rôle of instructor to the author, refusing to learn anything from him, which misrepresents his work by magnifying minor faults into important ones, which descends to personalities, or which, at its worst, adopts the brutal method of satire, either for self-glory, or from spite and prejudice, or from mere habit, or in accordance with the policy of some particular journal. It goes without saying that if we are to have perfect honesty, the one thing needful is a critical conscience, but among more formal and specific de-

[23] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 30.

terrents, Howells has emphasized the total abolition of the anonymous review, and the revival of the fine old custom of quotational criticism as practiced by Hunt, Lamb, and Hazlitt.

"He would even go so far as to say that there was no just and honest criticism without quotation. The critic was bound to make out his case, or else abdicate his function, and he could not make out his case, either for or against an author, without calling him in to testify." [24]

Superstition reverences the classics as infallible, attempts to set up minor works as classics, and misleads by judging literature with reference to models and to laws derived from the classics. The last offence is, as we have seen, the bulwark of a school of criticism so unpopular nowadays that to assail it is to fight a phantom. It is by no means easy to say, however, precisely when a reverence for the classics becomes superstitious, or precisely where the revivifying historic imagination of the scholar overreaches itself and plays tricks with rational æsthetics. The two things are constantly happening, nevertheless, and Howells objects with warrant to an absurd idolatry which looks upon the great ones as altogether perfect and that bids us admire beauties in literature which, however useful to the historian, is barren æsthetically. "At least three-fifths of the literature called classic, in all languages," he estimates, "no more lives than the poems and stories that perish monthly in our magazines. It is all printed and reprinted, generation after generation, cen-

[24] *Imaginary Interviews* (1910), p. 225.

tury after century; but it is not alive; it is as dead as the people who wrote it and read it, and to whom it meant something, perhaps; with whom it was a fashion, a caprice, a passing taste. A superstitious piety preserves it, and pretends that it has æsthetic qualities which can delight or edify; but nobody really enjoys it, except as a reflection of the past moods and humors of the race, or a revelation of the author's character; otherwise it is trash, and often very filthy trash, which the present trash generally is not." [25]

Howells' attack on superstition does not come off with quite the *éclat* of his assault on dishonest reviewing. One admires the sincerity and the zeal with which he lays hands on pedagogic error, but his scorn of historical studies obtrudes, not to his undoing, but at times to the nullification of his best effects. In the passage just quoted he touches an undeniably weak spot in the academic armor, but fails to pierce. He somehow succeeds in conveying the impression that the superstition lies as much in preserving and studying the historical documents as in attributing to them the literary qualities they have not. It may be laid down as a postulate that no progress can be made toward a rationalized æsthetics by the easy expedient of depressing historical studies.

This brings us to a consideration of Howells' doctrine of modernism, to which I have already made casual allusion. We noted, in the first chapter, the view of literary history it implied and the mannerism in speech resulting from it. If Howells did not, as Robert Louis Stevenson accused

[25] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 146.

him, think of the past as radically dead, he did think of it for the most part as a definite progress toward the present; and the inexperienced reader of his books may at first be mystified to find all of the literary virtues and none of the vices attributed to our own time. It will soon become clear, however, that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare should be read only as our contemporaries, and that the words *modern* and *contemporary,* which applied to a classic author constitute the very highest praise, are Howells' favorite synonyms for the terms *universal* and *permanent,* ordinarily employed in speaking of literary values. He would seek permanent and universal values in a literary work by ignoring its age, seek positive and independent merit in a scorn of relative merit —extending, so to speak, Matthew Arnold's fear of the historical fallacy. But here again it is interesting to inquire whether he was able consistently to maintain this standard of modernity in his own criticism. And again it must be said that his practice lags behind his theory. We do find that literature may be enjoyed as a reflection of the past. Howells was glad to have acquainted himself with Pope for this very reason. In his words:

"He was the first of the writers of great Anna's time whom I knew, and he made me ready to understand, if he did not make me understand at once, the order of mind and life which he belonged to. Thanks to his pastorals, I could long afterwards enjoy with the double sense requisite for full pleasure in them, such divinely excellent artificialities as Tasso's Aminta and Guarini's Pastor

Fido; things which you will thoroughly like only after you are in the joke of thinking how people once seriously liked them as high examples of poetry."[26]

Of Goldoni's comedies, which he particularly admired: "One ought not to smile at this morality, however, without remembering the age, the religion, and the race to which it was addressed; to these some very elementary principles might have seemed novel."[27] One wonders why this tolerance cannot be extended to all literature. One finds that it can to all that Howells liked; and it is to be said to the credit of his heart again that he liked especially to champion the despised and rejected; yes, even romanticists if they were sufficiently despised and rejected. The successive chapters on Mrs. Radcliffe and Sir Walter Scott in *Heroines of Fiction,* for instance, must furnish a puzzle to any reader who is not, as Howells would say, in the joke of this. The formula "of its age" is after all an extremely adaptable one, and may be used either to excuse or to condemn.

The fact is, Howells cherished not a few of the preferences and prejudices associated with unscientific criticism. His judgments suffer, for example, through his chivalrous attitude toward women, though in the case of Mrs. Radcliffe, just cited, it was indeed, as he said, high time for some one "to justify that poor lady's art." Again, he was perhaps too eager to champion those of his fellow-craftsmen who labored at a disadvantage,

[26] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 51.
[27] "Carlo Goldoni" in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1877), 40:608.

whether of racial prejudice, as in the cases of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt, or of persistent unpopularity, as in the case of J. W. De Forest, or of mere newness to the public, as in most cases. This loyalty was sincere and in the main praiseworthy and effective, but it did not hold the new and the living to quite the standard of the dead or the firmly established. Cause was given for the misunderstanding that prompted one irritated critic to exclaim: "To ask why Eden Phillpotts is a great novelist, and Thackeray, Dickens, and Meredith are not is not a question of criticism. It is a conundrum."

All of these specific shortcomings, however, really weigh very little in the balance against the service he rendered by the simple but still unpopular expedient of telling the truth about the masters of the past. We well know that the veriest tyro to-day would not commit some of the blunders common in the masters of yesterday. This is the answer to the conundrum just proposed. Professor Brander Matthews puts it as follows:

"However great Scott was, and Dickens, and Thackeray, they were none of them perfect artists; they were great in spite of gross derelictions from the highest standard. This is what Mr. Howells has tried to make plain even to careless readers; and it is for making this plain that careless readers are not willing to forgive him. Nothing is more certain to arrest progress than a smug satisfaction with the past—unless it is a slavish copying of the inferior models bequeathed to us by our more primitive predecessors. Nothing is more helpful than a clear understanding of the merits

and of the demerits of the early masters. The merits are obvious enough, but the demerits need to be discovered and declared before they can serve as warnings. It is not a paradox but a truism that the art of fiction is a finer art to-day than it was when Thackeray was writing—just as it was a finer art in Thackeray's time than it was when Cervantes was writing.'' [28]

Howells' contribution to criticism is happily out of all proportion to the merits of his theory, just as the volume of his critical writing bears no correspondence to his low opinion of the critical office. He stands very much in relation to this problem as the schoolboy to his sum when he arrives at the right answer by a wrong method of working. Thus, while he habitually construed the critical process as an occupation with books, his practice was habitually concerned with the life recorded in books. The body of his criticism is very impressive in its faithfulness to the single criterion of conformity to the realities. And modern literature has been made to reflect life more faithfully because it was written, and to acknowledge that reflection as an aim and ideal.

[28] ''Mr. Howells as a Critic'' in the *Forum* (1902), 32:637.

## III

### HIS IDEALS OF LITERATURE

THE essential fact about modern art was to Howells, as I have said, its conscious fusion of the ideals of literature, of architecture, or of painting, with the ideals of life. The novel of to-day aspires to be not an æsthetic document merely, not an ethic document in a didactic sense, but a revelation of moral fact in terms of the highest and most disinterested art. To state the matter in its simplest terms, literature and the cognate arts are to be identified in aim with all the other great civilizing forces, like science, that have raised the human family from a condition of savagery to a comparatively rich and happy existence. The great and sole function of scientific writing must be recognized as that of all serious artistic writing—to make the truth prevail. "Men are more like than unlike one another," says Howells; "let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity. Neither arts, nor letters, nor sciences, except as they somehow, clearly or obscurely, tend to make the race better and kinder, are to be regarded as serious interests; they are all lower than the rudest crafts that feed and house and clothe, for except they do this office they

are idle; and they cannot do this except from and through the truth." [1]

Such a conception of the function of literature presents little novelty to-day; nor was it by any means original in the late eighties, when Howells was issuing his pronouncements from the "Editor's Study." It had in its contemporary implications its genesis in the positivistic and scientific furnace through which earlier in the century the rich ore of romanticism had to pass. It attained in the Zolaism of the seventies its extreme of formal exposition, the identification not only of literary aims but of literary methods with the scientific. Then came its diffusion and modification. The correction of the *roman naturaliste* came almost immediately under the renaissance of the *roman psychologique*.[2] But the winds of doctrine, which blew mostly from France, left Howells unmoved. Although he was repeatedly called a doctrinaire, the basic principles of his doctrine were those simple ones that were the property of no man or school but with which the atmosphere of the whole literary world was saturate.

His most grateful support he drew from his Spanish friend and counterpart, Palacio-Valdés. Using the declaration made for modernity by Valdés in the prologue to *La Hermana San Sulpicio* (1889), he explained the power of literature, together with painting, sculpture, and music, to ennoble the race through the spirit of beauty to

[1] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 188.

[2] In 1886, the year of Howells' editorial accession, appeared Bourget's *Crime d'Amour*. *The World of Chance*, his novel of literary life, includes an incidental treatment of the opposing schools.

which the human heart is ever responsive. The beautiful effect it "receives from the true meaning of things; it does not matter what the things are, and it is the function of the artist who feels this effect to impart it to others." "I may add," he continues, "that there is no joy in art except this perception of the meaning of things and its communication; when you have felt it, and portrayed it in a poem, a symphony, a novel, a statue, a picture, an edifice, you have fulfilled the purpose for which you were born an artist." [3]

"The man of our time," says Valdés in his preface, "wishes to know everything and enjoy everything: he turns the objective of a powerful equatorial towards the heavenly spaces where gravitate the infinitude of the stars, just as he applies the microscope to the infinitude of the smallest insects; for their laws are identical. His experience, united with intuition, has convinced him that in nature there is neither great nor small; all is equal. All is equally grand, all is equally just, all is equally beautiful, because all is equally divine." "Things that appear ugliest in reality to the spectator who is not an artist," he continues, "are transformed into beauty and poetry when the spirit of the artist possesses itself of them. We all take part every day in a thousand domestic scenes, every day we see a thousand pictures in life, that do not make any impression upon us, or if they make any it is one of repugnance; but let the novelist come, and without betraying the truth, but painting them as they appear to his vision, he produces a most interesting

[3] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 62.

work, whose perusal enchants us. That which in life left us indifferent, or repelled us, in art delights us. Why? Simply because the artist has made us see the idea that resides in it. Let not the novelists, then, endeavor to add anything to reality, to turn it and twist it, to restrict it. Since nature has endowed them with this precious gift of discovering ideas in things, their work will be beautiful if they paint these as they appear. But if the reality does not impress them, in vain will they strive to make their work impress others."[4]

It was for this essentially democratic revaluation of artistic materials and experience that Howells stood in American literature and life; and during the years 1886 to 1892, when he was quartered in the "Editor's Study," to stand for it meant warfare—war on what he described, in reviewing Matthew Arnold's charges that America lacked interest and distinction, as the "superstition" of the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic, the distinguished. He and Mr. Henry Harper agreed after it was over that the long fight had been a losing one, so that during his occupancy of the "Easy Chair" it was not aggressively renewed. The discouragement was natural but not altogether reasonable, since it was based chiefly on the assumption, already demonstrated as erroneous in the case of Walt Whitman, that an art which drew its vitality from the life of a people must in virtue of that fact be accepted of the people and at once contribute to their life. The century had closed in a blazing recrudescence of the historical

[4] *Prólogo* to *La Hermana San Sulpicio* (1889), as translated in *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), pp. 61, 71.

romance. The boyish company gathered about the memory of Robert Louis Stevenson had found the time of the Spanish-American War propitious for putting a sort of finishing touch upon popular misconception of the new ideals. Realism was more than ever discredited, standing in the public mind a "sordid" thing, a negation of all the beauty and heroism and distinction in the world. But it was really otherwise with the best artists. In their minds beauty and heroism and distinction had been indeed supplanted as artistic ideals by the perception of meanings in things and its communication.

It is now clearer, though not clear enough for the salvation of popular fiction, that in disestablishing Beauty as an artistic criterion (even to the universal tolerance of Mr. John Galsworthy a "perpetual begging of the question") the company to which Howells belonged was seeking but to extend its domain, was demanding only more and more beauty. This is certainly what Howells tried to make clear in his remarks about Matthew Arnold. If we had not much of the kind Arnold missed, he said, we did not undervalue it, but fervently hoped to acquire more and more of it—only the centre and bounds of our interest had shifted to include "common beauty, common grandeur, or the beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself to the disadvantage of anything else." So the case against romance was not a grudge against nobility of character or the heroic in conduct but against a spirit that suppressed, where it did not sentimentalize, nine-tenths of the

real nobility and heroism in the world, that was inviting us to admire a swashbuckling that sustained no relation to the faith and feelings of the best among us, and a grandeur that shone at the expense of our common grandeur and greatly to the disadvantage of the futile strivings and vague aspirations on which we based our faith in man.

Sophisticated criticism now proceeds pretty generally upon the axiom of the essential equality of human experience for the purposes of art. It has become more scientific, it is true, and from time to time more metaphysical in its distinctions, but I do not know that it has really superseded or even essentially revised the enunciation of this principle embodied in the prologue of Valdés. As for Howells, it was always at the base of his reasoning, even in the early days when, as he laughingly declared to Boyesen, he was an "idealist." He was always finding beautiful meanings in things regarded by the general as ignoble. He built his first published novel, *Their Wedding Journey* (1872), entirely in illustration of it; and he subsequently made it the philosophic justification for his tireless endeavor "to show poor real life its foolish face." [5]

But while to the democratic spirit it is no longer permissible to question an artist's choice of subject matter, but only the value of the artistic product into which the experience has been transmuted, there is still with us an aristocratic spirit which is the negation of this, which instructs the author not to choose types and subjects unworthy of the dignity of artistic representation, which

[5] Vide *Their Wedding Journey* (ed. 1899), p. 67.

will not forgive Howells for setting down the native Philistinism without malice, and which declares that the world he portrayed is an uninteresting world in spite of all that genius could do for it. This frank objection to Howells' attempt to give America a novel of manners thus divides criticism hostile to him into two classes, the one repudiating his world, the other questioning his method of treating it or, in the most unsympathetic instances, his capacity for catching its significance. I wish I could say that these categories correspond to eras or periods of Howells criticism, if not of criticism in general, as in a loose way they do. But the former gives constant evidences of its "unofficial" survival. Among all the reviews of this class in my collection, one of the most thoroughgoing, and one of which I am especially fond, appeared as late as 1903 in the columns of the *Atlantic Monthly.* Harriet Waters Preston, reviewing *The Kentons,* writes:

"The truth is that the novel of manners demands, first of all, manners to be delineated. But manners, in the widest sense, imply homogeneous and stable conditions; a certain social creed and hierarchy accepted without question and almost without thought, together with a tyrannous tradition antedating but always coexisting with long codified laws of conduct; and manners in this general sense, we have none in America." [6]

As a useful technical distinction, such a limitation of the term manners is perhaps to be recommended, but that such definition is not the critic's

[6] Harriet Waters Preston, "The Latest Novels of Howells and James," in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1903), 91:77.

purpose is made evident by her use of the phrases "in the widest sense" and "in this general sense." To the novelist like Howells, who has found instability of social code a condition richly productive of manners, the tyranny of tradition is the dictator of manners in the narrowest sense. Otherwise the Kentons are excluded from the category of proper types, and our critic says in so many words that "we owe Mr. Howells a grudge" for having made us know them. She may desire with Señor Valdés to view the celestial spaces and the infinitude of the stars, but she radically objects to having the insects thrust into the field of vision. The Kentons, the tender solicitude of this aging pair for each other and for their foolish children, their pathetic fatuity, their lamentable ignorance of the ways of the world beyond the Alleghanies, their beautiful and gradual growth into mutual dependence—how familiar and touching it all is! Yet we are bidden to regard it as a deformity on the face of civilization.

"Types they may be, but normal and complete human beings they are not. They are the scum and spawn of a yeasty deep,—the monstrous offspring of barbarous and illicit social relations. They are necessarily short-lived, and, it is to be hoped, sterile; and if let alone would probably perish with the transitory conditions that gave them birth. To make of their deformities a dime side show at our noisy National Fair is, to say the least of it, not nice. To pursue them intently—to approach their sad case with paraphernalia of literary preparation—is like riding in pink, and

with winding of horns, to a hunt of cockroaches!" [7]

Thus Brahmanism from time to time gets in its word, but our literature has continued to develop a positive and inclusive view of civilization such as the conception of Howells and Valdés provides for. The psychologic and sociologic spirit has made all humanity its province and has found the social relations evolved from new conditions far from "barbarous and illicit." As a matter of fact, it has crossed the frontiers of barbarism in pursuit of strange atavisms, but these have enticed those modern souls like Kipling and Conrad, who include in their composition a perceptible romantic strain. What is common to the men of our epoch is an illimitable expansion of interest, an outward-facing attitude which admits no imagining that their loyalty to a group, a tradition, or an ideal, can be fostered to good issue by ignoring the claims of the human to sympathetic understanding wherever manifest and in whatever lowly condition. The choicest spirits of our age are trying to make men better known to one another by and through the truth. In this endeavor, it is Howells' distinction to have chosen his field at our own door-steps, to have made the despised and rejected American tradition of social equality his ideal, and to have stressed more than others the humanitarian impulse behind the enlightenments of art—the impulse to liberate men from the curse of narrowness and selfishness.

I would not suggest that Howells in his insis-

[7] Harriet Waters Preston, "The Latest Novels of Howells and James," in the *Atlantic Monthly* (1903), 91:77.

tence upon the instructional office of the novel made any concession to didacticism. Modernity meant to him a final mediation between moral art and art for art's sake, and a dismissal of both. In his view, the novel on the one hand could not exist for its own sake nor on the other could it accomplish anything by cultivating poetic justice in its composition or encouraging generalization and easy analogy in its interpretation. He wished it to rely on fidelity alone to quicken the reader's sense of kinship with his fellows and in particular a sense of his own capacities for good or for evil. And his faith in it as a socializing instrument included a Conradian belief in the efficacy of a vivid impressionism to touch the heart and a Meredithian confidence that it did point and aid to "the firmer footing of those who succeed us." When as a boy he came under Lowell's influence and obediently tried to like everything the master liked, and fell instantly in love with Chaucer, try as he would he could find no place in his heart for Spenser. As a man he flouted the polemic wherever found, consigning the abstract and the typical to the melodrama and extravaganza of the theatre, and lamenting the Tolstoi of the parables as a loss to art, finding the apologue of high morality as worthless as ever the great Russian found the allegorizing of the decadents.

The realism of Howells, repudiating the simple poetic justice of the sentimental novelists and scorning to allow the truth to be tampered with by way of making a sermon, is not, however, disposed to ignore indebtedness to the rare talents of an earlier day who succeeded under the heavy

handicap imposed by moral teaching. Howells in his *Heroines of Fiction* is glad to head his list of modern heroines with Clarissa Harlowe, and pleads eloquently for a reversal of the sentence which relegates Maria Edgeworth to "the sad society of mere sermoners." He says:

"Fiction had not yet conceived of the supreme ethics which consist in portraying life truly and letting the lesson take care of itself. After a hundred years this conception is not yet very clear to many novelists, or, what is worse, to their critics; and the novel, to save itself alive from the contempt and abhorrence in which the most of good people once held it, had to be good in the fashion of the sermon rather than in the fashion of the drama. It felt its way slowly and painfully by heavy sloughs of didacticism and through dreary tracts of moral sentiment to the standing it now has, and we ought to look back at its flounderings, not with wonder that it floundered so long, but that it ever arrived. In fact, it did not flounder so very long, and it arrived at what is still almost an ideal perfection in the art of Jane Austen." [8]

Clearly, so far as the time-worn formula of *l'art pour l'art* is a protest against the subversion of beauty by the moral intent, its claim has been granted; so far as it would subvert the moral sense in the pursuit of beauty it is to be answered by a new interpretation of the old truism: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." Good art, in short, *is* good morality. Howells is willing enough to concede the possibility of an unmoral *aim*, that

[8] *Heroines of Fiction* (1901), I, 26.

an artist may create solely with an eye for beauty, but that beauty can ever be the sole effect of his creation, is inconceivable. "Morality penetrates all things," he says; "it is the soul of all things. Beauty may clothe it on, whether it is false morality and an evil soul, or whether it is true and a good soul. In the one case the beauty will corrupt, and in the other it will edify, and in either case it will infallibly and inevitably have an ethical effect, now light, now grave, according as the thing is light or grave."[9] It is quite possible to quarrel with Howells' terminology, but not, I think, with his meaning. A representation of life is bound to be in effect a criticism of life, and an artist cannot by invoking an old and still hazy abstraction such as beauty escape his moral responsibility.

His notions of the beauty that corrupts, however, are neither so clear nor so unexceptionable; they hardly consist, indeed, with the rudimentary principles thus far sketched. It appears on close inquiry that the truth may be corrupting. There is no inconsistency in a realist objecting to books that portray bestiality "under a glamour of something spiritual and beautiful and sublime."[10] The manner of treatment would be sufficient to remove such works from the realistic category. But Howells does not hesitate to object to portrayals of bestiality not only in the books of modern writers whose sincerity he praises and whose

[9] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 83.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 61. Translation from *La Hermana San Sulpicio* (1889), I, xxxi.

philosophy of life he admires but in the classics. He goes so far as to call for expurgated editions of the latter, saying:

"I hope the time will come when the beast-man will be so far subdued and tamed in us that the memory of him in literature shall be left to perish . . . that the pedant pride which now perpetuates it as an essential part of those poets shall no longer have its way. At the end of the ends such things do defile, they do corrupt. We may palliate them or excuse them for this reason or that, but that is the truth, and I do not see why they should not be dropped from literature, as they were long ago dropped from the talk of decent people."[11]

I have already commented upon Howells' extreme readiness to divorce the historic interest from the æsthetic. This question, however, is one that does not need to be debated on grounds of scholarship. It is a matter of simple justice to the author and his reader. We have all seen Chaucer modernized and mangled, Burns purified by ruining the rime and obscuring the reason, an insult to the genius of the poet and to the intelligence of all who would know him. We have witnessed the droll spectacle of Swinburne inviting us to admire the beauties of a poem by Villon part of which the idolater of *Mademoiselle de Maupin* found too vile to print even in its antique French. And we ought all by this time to have seen that no man can be trusted to exercise anything but the wildest vagary in this procedure of expurga-

[11] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 54. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 109-113.

tion, for it is in essence unnatural and unæsthetic. To remove the parts from what was in its inception and execution an organic whole requires the assumption of a false attitude and a suspension of appreciation. The suppression of evidence necessary for correct judgment, suppression by a meddler of what the author has freely furnished, must be an abomination before all mature and candid souls; as for the young, they ought not to read fragments of a work that would defile and corrupt as a whole, or to cultivate authors apt to prove dangerous on close acquaintanceship. Moreover, one does not live long in this wicked world without encountering enough bestiality to render innocuous the works of the great literary masters. And finally, it were double sacrilege to begin this ghastly enterprise of dropping the beast-man from our classics where one bent on preserving the innocence of youth would naturally have to begin it, with the greatest and most accessible of our classics, the King James Bible.

Having agreed that there is no comfort in ignorance, and having received with acclaim the declaration that the man of to-day should know everything, I see no consistency in being asked to live by the talk of "decent people" alone. The Wife of Bath is on her pilgrimage to-day, and to spurn her acquaintance is clearly to invite sclerosis of the sympathies. Howells' squeamishness does not end with the license of bygone centuries. He brings it into the very holy of holies of modernism. He is happy to find that by virtue of what he congratulates us upon as our Anglo-Saxon tradition or convention of decency, we are forbidden

to follow in the footsteps of the great French and Russian masters. He admonishes our writers: "You cannot deal with Tolstoi's and Flaubert's subjects in the absolute artistic freedom of Tolstoi and Flaubert; since DeFoe, that is unknown among us; but if you deal with them in the manner of George Eliot, of Thackeray, of Dickens, of society, you may deal with them even in the magazines."[12] But after all he has said about the methods of these eminent Victorians, and after he has told us so often of the infinite superiority of Tolstoi's, this seems cruel. No one of the great English trio fully satisfied him; George Eliot is the only one who can be said to have satisfied him at all; he saw the true light dawn over the steppes of Russia; he found the last word said in Turgeniev and Tolstoi; and yet he rejoices that darkness still hangs over our land; he finds it right and fitting that the Anglo-Saxon mouth should be stopped. Why? One would fain let the question pass, but the truth must out: In our country we write for young ladies.[13] Is not that a pretty box in which to shut our budding Tolstoi! Grown-up Americans may have their Flaubert and Zola, because the books can be locked up; but let our writers continue to write realism for young ladies.

The argument by which Howells half-reconciles this amazing prescription with the large and generous aims already defined for a national literature is interesting and displays an unsuspected relevance to those aims. He declares that America

[12] *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), p. 161.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. 149.

has not the sex problems of Continental fiction, that conditions are actually more fortunate here than abroad, and that, consequently, the novelist who portrays our conditions does wrong to infuse unwholesome conceptions of love.[14] Now, such a declaration presents two distinct aspects, representing on the one hand a regrettable restriction and on the other a peculiar strength of Howells' own art. In his geographical distinctions Howells is in the first place clearly theorizing away his self-imposed limitations in subject matter and seeking to form others upon himself; but in the second place he is sincerely describing the representative America of his day, the world which no one else could portray as he portrayed it, and in which the situations of the Continental novel did not figure. Respectability was in all its implications supremely characteristic of that world, and the young lady did occupy in it a position she has held in no other. It is the peculiar glory of the Howells art to have taken the representative and characteristic and without betraying the truth to have made it rich with beauty and meaning; but this is the result of a temperamental fitness and an intense specialization that by neither his own declarations nor those of his colleagues should be exacted of others.

The limitations, consequently, are for the most part evident in their effect upon others. For one does not think of Howells simply as a supreme literary artist, or simply as an active and enlightened apostle, preaching the aims and methods

[14] *Vide* "Mr. Howells on Love and Literature," by A. Schade van Westrum, in *Lamp* (1904), 28:26.

of the European masters who brought him into his own. His long leadership in precept and example, coupled with his powerful editorial connections, made him in a very real sense a schoolmaster to the younger generation, although his school denied being a school as such. And into this "magazine school," which Mrs. Atherton periodically denounces, and for which she holds Howells responsible, he did infuse, under the specious title of Anglo-Saxon convention of decency, an ideal largely the property of writers whom he did not particularly admire. But while I do not consider the influence of this tradition of "niceness" on his minor disciples a matter for gratitude, I am happy to detect an exaggeration in Mr. Alexander Harvey's statement that "every time Howells praises a writer, he turns out to be of the sissy school."[15] The major figures reached by his influence took radical exception to his exaltation of prudery. It is a pleasure to note that Boyesen, who of all his admirers stands most closely in relation of discipleship, rose ardently in rebellion against the "young ladies"; and in general those men whose vitality in our literature Howells was most continuously predicting and acknowledging have displayed the most virility. His difficulties with the work of Mr. Robert Herrick, for example, which he found almost unequalled in moral power, were considerable. Mr. Herrick, he complained, "sees the social conditions, as regards the wilfulness and waywardness

[15] *William Dean Howells: A Study of the Achievement of a Literary Artist* (1917), p. 196. The first book-length study of Howells to appear.

of women, rather redder than they are, or say yellower, for there is a strain of vulgarity in their aberrations which is very suggestive of a kind of modern journalism."[16] Again, the work of Mr. Hamlin Garland he followed with the highest interest and approbation; yet he could not enjoy its frankness in facing facts when the facts happened to be those about sexual relationships. His comment on Garland's handling of erotic themes is of especial interest because, being less geographical, it shows his willingness to expose his temperamental and conventional bias:

". . . It puts the gross passions, the propensities to shame, rather than flatters or entices them; but it doesn't recognize the beast in the man's desire of the woman, the satyr leer which is the complement of the lover's worship. In *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly,* in *Hesper,* in *Money Magic,* measurably in them all, you find the refusal, when it comes to the fact, to ignore what cannot be denied. I am old-fashioned, and I have moments when I could wish that the author had not been of such unsparing conscience. That is all, and with this wish noted I can give myself to the entire pleasure which the purity and wholesomeness of his fiction offers me."[17]

The biographical facts commonly cited to bear out the contention that Howells' penchant for respectability seriously limited his own sympathies are amusing rather than impressive. The inci-

[16] "Robert Herrick" in the *North American Review* (1909), 189:812.
[17] "Mr. Garland's Books" in the *North American Review* (1912), 196:523.

dent of Pfaff's beer-cellar, which promises to become another such classic as the Whittier birthday story, has recently been suggested as a final criticism of him and his work. Howells visited this celebrated Bohemia on Broadway as a young man fresh from the ultra-refinement of the Bostonian literary circle, and penned a description of it in a manner somewhat foreign to his gentle and tolerant nature. Those who took offence at it, however, did not hold themselves strictly to the letter of justice, since Howells' chief objection to Pfaff's was that it was a sham Bohemia, though it was perfectly evident that he would have been no more at home in the Bohemia of Paul Verlaine. Nor was this aspect of the matter, in which lay the point of Howells' jibe, duly noted on the publication of William Winter's *Memories of Authors,* when the episode was brought out for rehauling and given its vogue as a critical weapon. Of the comments called forth by Winter's memoirs, I liked best an editorial by Mr. Colby of the *Bookman.* Mr. Colby, after remarking that extreme niceness leads readers to plunge "into rebellious extremes of coarseness, swearing, perhaps, or eating with their knives," goes on to discuss a detail from "The Pursuit of the Piano."

"Thus the hero of one of his short stories printed a few years ago, observes from his window a piano-case having on it the name and address of a young woman. After long and very minute reflection he concludes that the young woman may have been a little girl whom he used to see years before running barefooted on her father's lawn. The fancied identification of this

young woman, now no doubt quite grown-up, with the child whose active brown legs he distinctly remembers, brings the hot blushes to that hero's cheeks. It is the romanticism of prudery—an extreme instance, perhaps, but illustrating Mr. Howells' spinster-like intemperance in matters of propriety. The romancers idealize the manly virtues of their heroes; he idealizes the niceness of his. It is no harder to slay a giant than to blush in solitude at the thought of brown legs. There are, of course, deeds of propriety no less incredible than deeds of blood, and the 'refinement' of Mr. Howells' heroes often seems as unfamiliar to this earth as the beauty and bravery of Sir Walter's."[18]

The fashion of poking fun at Howells' niceness and of insisting upon the limitation represented by his reverence for "decent people" will disappear before a wider and deeper acquaintance with his works, in which it must be found that he has reaped a unique and a substantial reward for his circumspection. Objections are prevalently based on the assumption that there is such a thing as a realism that can treat a given subject without leaving lacunæ—the realism, let us say, that was to give us the "great American novel" we used to hear so much about and that is still employed as a hypothetical standard of comparison. Howells in confining himself to such erotic manifestations as he found in the society he treated, and especially devoting himself to a detached and intensive study of the minutiæ of sexual differences as displayed in that highly correct society,

[18] *The Bookman* (1908), 28:124.

has left lacunæ so far as concerns a hypothetically complete portrayal of life, comparable to those left by novelists engrossed with the animal side of man's nature, but he has given us a great many things that are not to be found elsewhere than in his novels. To cite an example, the subtleties of American courtship as contrasted with the European are nowhere exposed as in these novels. The wooing of Marcia Hubbard he might well have called a national as well as a modern instance, and it took a prodigious niceness to enter into it as he did. The affair of Ellen Kenton is done with amazing insight. No one has studied in such an attitude of critical detachment the oddities of the Mid-Western combination of Puritanical rectitude with unlimited freedom. It may truly be said that Howells beyond any one else has given a nationally verifiable character to love-making, and this he could never have done without his sympathy with "decent people" and his vast acquaintance with the proprieties. It is only after the proprieties are understood and accepted as social phenomena that the passion of his people can be appreciated. And the passions of some of these people derive a truly dreadful power from the decora that hedge them in. One might wander a long time in loose company without getting such a shock as that afforded by the animality of Christine Dryfoos, for example, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes.*

In general, Howells fulfilled a rare artistic mission in applying the doctrine of the equality of experience to American society. He proved that the commonplace is not necessarily trivial or in-

significant. Being a poet (except when he wrote in verse), he wanted above all things else to make men appreciate the poetry at their doorsteps. And his unique gift was that which enabled him to discover how rich the vein of it is that strikes through the quotidian fact of existence. He found it in the routine of receptions and teas, and in the inanities of the summer veranda. He found the glow of romance—to employ the favorite phrase of his detractors—not under tropical moons (the shipwreck and adventures of Captain Fenton among the coral islands must be conceded the most ineffective episode in the entire range of his writings) but in the desolation of snow-locked New England villages. His cry was ever—and it was a *cri du cœur:* "Ah! poor real life which I love, can I make others share the delight I find in thy foolish and insipid face?" p. 67

There was a time when Howells was a little too sure that dissatisfaction with the commonplace betokened a shallow mind. This was the time when with a variety of mock-apology and critical admonition to discard all abnormal and unusual manifestations he wrote his creed into the dialogue and comment of *Their Wedding Journey* (1872):

"As in literature the true artist will shun the use of real events if they are of an improbable character, so the sincere observer of man will not desire to look upon his heroic or occasional phases, but will seek him in his habitual moods of vacancy and tiresomeness. To me, at any rate, he is at such times very precious; and I never perceive him to be so much of a man and a brother as

when I feel the pressure of his vast, natural, unaffected dullness. Then I am able to enter confidently into his life and inhabit there, to think his shallow and feeble thoughts, to be moved by his dumb, stupid desires, to be dimly illumined by his stinted inspirations, to share his foolish prejudices, to practice his obtuse selfishness."

He came later to regret what he pronounced the misconception that construed these remarks as prohibitory dicta and gave his descriptions of the true realist a more positive cast:

"In life he finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God has made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry."[19]

As a critical apostle of the commonplace he may have misdirected a multitude of second-rate and imitative writers, but on the original minds he was a compulsion to fresh beauties and an exactitude our literature had never known. They have not devoted themselves, any more than novelists ever have devoted themselves, exclusively to chronicling the noon-day spaces of life, nor have they habitually sought existence upon the normal plane of the average man and woman, so incomparably incarnated in the persons of Basil and Isabel March; but whether seeking high or low, they have learned to approach their matter with a reverence for the verities such as moved neither Sir Walter nor the apostle to *Les Misérables.*

[19] *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), p. 16.

# IV

## HIS LITERARY METHOD

THE aim of the Howells-Valdés type of realism, to delight and ennoble the soul by revealing the truth, the idea that resides in all things great and trivial, and this through the ever-living sense of beauty, is thus couched in terms too generous for monopoly by the literature of any one time or place. Such was the aim of romanticism at its best, and so far as romanticism was faithful to its highest calling, we are to reverence it. It struggled, says Howells, "to overthrow the classic tradition . . . to seek poetry in the common experiences of men and to find beauty in any theme; to be utterly free, untrammeled, and abundant; to be in literature what the Gothic is in architecture. It perished because it came to look for beauty only, and all that was good in it became merged in realism, which looks for truth."[1] We have now to deal with the romanticism that lived on unofficially, and in particular to deal with it as it lived to prod the dominant school into a defence, into an analysis of its literary methods.

Here especially must it be remembered that we labor with a loose and difficult terminology. The word *romantic* is perhaps the vaguest in the critical lexicon, but so firmly ensconced that even the historian defines it at his peril. Consider how

[1] *Modern Italian Poets* (1887), p. 135.

Professor Beers has had to defend himself for having tried to make it mean something in a historical sense. Professor Brander Matthews some years ago proposed relieving this long-suffering word by making derivative terms share some of its technical meanings, but his discerning effort was wholly ineffectual. More recently, it is true, Professor Stuart P. Sherman in his brilliant sequence of essays on contemporary literature [2] has cleared the way to a re-establishment of this and other old and misused terms, endowing them with meanings at once definite and comprehensive; and Mr. Wilson Follett, taking several hints from Professor Sherman, has in his discussion of the modern novel [3] treated "romances" with engaging lucidity. But the antithesis of realism and romanticism is still generally employed with the devious connotation described in the popular handbooks of Professor Bliss Perry and Mr. Clayton Hamilton—and was almost exclusively so employed in the days when Robert Louis Stevenson and his supporters were remonstrating against William Dean Howells and his school.

The realist, in the common acceptation of the title, first endeavors to link art beyond all severance with the actual facts of life; he holds the *raison d'être* of fiction to be the exact depiction of human conduct and motive. Reasonable as this seems, the romanticist will shy at any such words as *actual* or *exact*. "And as the root of the whole matter," bids Robert Louis Stevenson, "let him bear in mind that his novel is not a transcript of

[2] *On Contemporary Literature*, N. Y., Holt, 1917.
[3] *The Modern Novel*, N. Y., Knopf, 1918.

life, to be judged by its exactitude; but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its significant simplicity." [4]

The romancer, then, wishes his characters and their story simplified and unified. From the tangled play of contradictory motives, he plucks out a ruling passion. His narrative is a chain of direct causes and effects, many of them dependent upon the complicity of accident and coincidence. The right thing to keep the plot moving in its foreordained direction is sure to happen, whether the chances of its happening in life are favorable or not. If too obviously not, the author adds events or alters with the purpose of making the tale believable. In fine, he creates a world of his own, which he manipulates as he chooses, offering it perhaps as a means of escape from the real and "sordid" world. The novel then becomes either a work of "idealism" or an instrument of diversion, the "pocket theatre" of Marion Crawford. Or perhaps he holds it the duty of art to explain life by reconstructing it in a more intelligible medium, by scorning its mere facts to make its essentials the more readily appreciable. He then offers his work as a vehicle of truth as well as diversion. Stevenson again:

"For the welter of impressions, all forcible but discrete, which life presents, it substitutes a certain artificial series of impressions, all indeed most feebly represented, but all aiming at the same effect, all eloquent of the same idea, all

[4] "A Humble Remonstrance," in *Memories and Portraits. Works,* Scribner (1909), XIII, 357. Originally appeared in *Longman's Magazine,* December, 1884.

chiming together like consonant notes in music or like the graduated tints in a good picture. From all its chapters, from all its pages, from all its sentences, the well-written novel echoes and re-echoes its one creative and controlling thought; to this must every incident and character contribute; the style must have been pitched in unison with this; and if there is anywhere a word that looks another way, the book would be stronger, clearer, and (I had almost said) fuller without it.'' [5]

Realism is the reverse of this. Especially does it find in the simplification upon which Stevenson insists as a capital condition of beauty the betrayal of art; it is in the substitution of lighter and more natural but not trivial causes for the crude propulsive forces of an elder day—including Balzac's day—that it chiefly seeks its effect. The realist aims at attenuation and complexity of motive, finding life the more complex the more closely it is scrutinized. He cultivates also freedom and simplicity of design and plumes himself especially on the absence of theatricalities from his work. Accidents happen in his novel too, just as they happen in the real and daily world; but they are likely to be not of the ''moving'' variety, and furthermore, they are often not set right. Hence, he is said to be pessimistic, and to deny the principle of selection in art. Howells was stung by this accusation that realism adopted absence of selection as its principle, and attributed the misconception to a polemical delusion of Zola's.

[5] ''A Humble Remonstrance,'' in *Memories and Portraits. Works,* Scribner (1909), XIII, 357. Originally appeared in *Longman's Magazine,* December, 1884.

Certainly it could not have derived from Zola's practice, or from the practice of any one else; for it is difficult indeed to imagine any art the result of so ludicrous a principle. The art of Howells is the result of the nicest selection, but it selects not to eliminate but to preserve a sense of "the welter of impressions . . . that life presents." The freshness and charm of life—to employ the romantic term, its glow—as well as the infinite depths of its sadness, are to be felt with poignancy only as the impression approaches actuality, as the artist has caught and transfixed upon his page something of life's recognizable complexity, its confusion,—its chaos, if you like,—its kaleidoscopic succession of sights, and its inextricable tangling of motives. The manipulation of a "certain artificial series of impressions . . . all eloquent of the same idea" is an art to charm the young or divert the weary. With whatever skill it be accomplished, it robs the reader of his most precious privilege, to observe life in the actual living through the medium of the printed page. And this, all said and done, is the abiding privilege, the permanent urge of the fiction reader. Rare souls are they indeed whose joy in unification and simplification survives many decades of novel reading, who can continue their delight in what the realist depreciatingly terms "stories."

Now, the taste for stories, one gathers from Howells, is a very natural part of life, but a part that is especially characteristic of adolescence. He has dwelt longest upon this theme in his depiction of Boyne Kenton (*The Kentons*). When a grown man devotes himself to romance and feels

that realism is a process somehow of abstracting the briskness and joy from life, he is shown not yet to have outgrown the tastes of his boyhood. He wishes to find in the world of modern literature a world comparable to that in which moved the Indians, the athletes, or the heroes of chivalry who once delighted him. Not all members of civilized communities, Howells once reminded us in "The Editor's Study," are civilized even in their habits; much less should we expect to find them sophisticated in their tastes. Nay, he admitted, we all have our moods of barbarism, which may be harmless, but are not "high moods or fortunate moments," when we relish trapeze performances, prestidigitation, negro minstrelsy, and romantic fiction. Psycho-analysis, in treating of the "consolatory mechanisms" of literature, has accomplished much since Howells spoke to clarify our notions of these moods and to make us less scornful of them; but our esteem for the intellects of those who constantly demand romance as consolatory literature has not greatly increased. Normally, after we have consumed a large quantity of romances in youth, the taste for conjuring becomes a matter of occasional mood with us, and we take our joy and find our consolation not in the skilful construction of an imitation of life, or in an improvement upon it, but in a mirror held up to Nature herself. This is the realist's ideal, to hold the mirror up to Nature, not to make a model illustrating Nature, in hope of eliminating the unessential and confusing, or to depart from her, in the childish desire to construct something prettier or more amusing than anything she has to offer.

The manifesto of 1882, the *Century* essay on Henry James, declares not only that the new school "studies human nature much more in its wonted aspects, and finds its ethical and dramatic examples in the operation of lighter but really not less vital motives,"[6] but that the "stories"—meaning specifically in this connection, plots—were all told long ago. Human character, it maintains, is the novelist's proper field, and any contriving of plots is to be discouraged as false and mechanical. Stevenson offered the writer a choice: he might either let his characters make the plot or provide the characters necessary to work out a preconceived scheme of events. For the realist, the second, with whatever dexterity it be accomplished, is bound to result in the incomparably lower form of art. Every event, barring chance and accident, must grow out of human character; and (I think it was Mr. John Galsworthy who put it in three words) "plot cannot characterize." Turgeniev is said to have begun his stories by sketching the biography of each personage, formulating as completely as possible the tastes, habits, and traits of each, with exhaustive genealogical researches (his readers may well believe) before thinking at all of what they were to do, into what complications their respective propensities were to lead them. Then, thoroughly familiar with his group of imaginary people, he needed only to bring them together into some relationship, when they would proceed to act out the drama for themselves. The ideal method, whether actually realized or not, is for the artist

[6] "Henry James, Jr." in the *Century* (1882), 3(n. s.):28.

to refrain from all management of affairs, conceiving his office to be that of reporter, not stage director. It would be a generalization of the "glittering" variety, but I imagine it would answer pretty well the feeling of the extreme realist, to say that the plot is the beginning of a romantic tale, and upon its construction the romancer expends his arduous labor, while the characters themselves begin a realistic story, the plot being the inevitable result rather than the conscious aim. The realist, Howells would say, writes "from the beginning forward, and never from the ending backward."[7] Writing from the ending backward is, of course, precisely what Stevenson and Poe recommend in their celebrated essays on the method of composition.

Here again Howells is characteristically the extremist. His admiration for the Spanish picaresque will be recalled. He urges literary youth to emulate its freedom in structure. He would have no manner of *pre*vision, entire dependence being placed upon *re*vision. If it be found difficult to imagine Turgeniev's perfection the result of such a method, we are informed that the inspiration of freedom from pre-established design is capable of crowning a work with "unimagined beauty." The writer as he proceeds is educated out of his mediocrity. For example, the following account informs how Shakespeare was probably educated by the composition of his immortal *Hamlet:*

[7] "The Counsel of Literary Age," in *Imaginary Interviews* (1910), p. 290.

"Probably the playwright started with the notion of making Hamlet promptly kill his stepfather, rescue Ophelia from the attempt to climb out over the stream on a willow branch, forgive his erring mother as more sinned against than sinning, welcome Laertes back to Denmark, and with the Ghost of his father blessing the whole group, and Polonius with his arm in a sling, severely but not fatally wounded, form the sort of stage picture, as the curtain went down, that has sent audiences home, dissolved in happy tears, from so many theatres. But Shakespeare, being a dramatist as well as a playwright, learned from Hamlet himself that Hamlet could not end as he had meant him to end. Hamlet, in fact, could not really end at all, and, in the sort of anticlimax in which the tragedy closes, he must rise from death, another and a truer ghost than the buried majesty of Denmark, and walk the world forever." [8]

In this matter of plot the realist has his most serious difficulty with the unskilled reader; and the quarrel usually resolves into a rebellion on the part of the "savage" against the *ending* of the story. It is true that the tawdry and theatrical finale that delighted another generation with the spectacle of every one from lord and lady to maid and butler ecstatically falling into each other's arms, with the villain safe in the arms of God or the law, has long since been discarded by writers of any pretensions to modernity. The crudest witness, however he may applaud such a delightful consummation, realizes that for the

[8] "The Counsel of Literary Age," in *Imaginary Interviews* (1910), p. 289.

nonce he has forsaken this ill-ordered world and its disappointments. Nevertheless, even in the most serious work, it is still demanded that the ending be right. Almost any amount of cruel truth will be endured throughout the novel, if only, in some subtle manner, it be contrived to evade what the magazines used to advise their contributors to shun—the "artistic ending."

This is a matter, however, upon which readers have small cause to quarrel with Howells. Henry James, indeed, found no endings in life, no "stories," only episodes; hence, conceiving the height of veracity to be attained by transcribing our existence in its episodical nature, he declined to end many of his compositions at all. But such perversity Howells only commended from afar. He found definite endings in life, and constantly supplied them in his fiction. He has, in fact, been accused of bidding for popularity in his easy descensions to the conventional. Without the presumption of attributing such a motive, one may safely say that he was rather too fond of giving his characters in marriage.

Aristotle speaks for new schools as well as old. He voiced a timeless truth for the narrative art when he prescribed for the drama a beginning, a middle, and an end. No story is brought about except through an unstable situation; and no meaning can be given a story except by resolving that situation to some sort of concluding status. The common misapprehension not only of readers but of artists themselves lies in the assumption that in discarding marriage, death, and like catastrophes, this concluding status is discarded.

Henry James and Howells were at one in their sophistication, realizing that a conclusion may be wholly spiritual. In the case of many earlier realists, we can see that the novelist's æsthetics did not keep pace with his widening and deepening comprehension of life. Some of the clumsy introductions and conclusions of Balzac and Turgeniev, for example, bear witness to an art not only in advance of the readers to whom they seem loath to commit it, but ever so little beyond their own understanding of its fineness. Can one imagine Turgeniev's *Liza* (*Nest of Nobles*) inconclusive? Yet hear him:

"'And is that the end?' the unsatisfied reader may perhaps ask. 'What became of Lavretsky afterwards? and of Liza?' But what can one say about people who are still alive, but who have already quitted the worldly stage? Why should we turn back to them? It is said that Lavretsky has visited the distant convent in which Liza has hidden herself—and has seen her. . . ."

Old notions such as the poetic justice that awarded happiness to virtue and punishment to vice were long ago consigned to the realm of fairy tales, and their extinction in serious fiction has naturally wrought havoc with old-fashioned methods of story-telling; but it is lamentable that their passing should have given rise to the notion that the higher art must consist in being inconclusive.

We arrive here at a matter in which the romancers are more deeply deserving of antipathy. They have not merely, in perpetuating the old convention of poetic justice, pandered to the "un-

official sentimentalism," to borrow the admirable phrase of Mr. Conrad, that is always with us, not merely divorced the novel from life by simplification of motive and theatric design; they have in their reliance on action, exalting the overt and often meaningless event above the motive, brought themselves to impotence in the depiction of spiritual crises. They prove the power of the spirit of man by appeal to miracles. Theirs is the artistic faith that demands a sign and as such has alienated from itself all honest and inquiring hearts.

If you would see the spiritual breakdown of an art which displays in many respects an admirable solicitude for the realities but which in its final appeal concedes to the popular demand for miracles, witness the orgy of expiation in which Mr. William Allen White, when he came to finish *A Certain Rich Man,* felt it necessary to close the career of John Barclay. It is not enough that Barclay restore his family to poverty and happiness; he must rise from the fireplace, where he has stirred the last of his blazing stock, the poker in one hand, bless the reunion of his daughter and her lover with the other, and go out to a heroic death. And his mother, when she learns that he has sacrificed his life to rescue a woman of bad reputation from drowning, must lift her arms heavenward and cry: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." Compare this with the regeneration of Dryfoos, whose avarice also brought death to his own flesh and blood, and think of the benediction that descended upon Silas Lapham as the reward of his less tragic coming to social consciousness:

"In the shadow of his disaster they returned to something like their old, united life; they were at least all together again; and it will be intelligible to those whom life has blessed with vicissitude, that Lapham should come home the evening after he had given up everything to his creditors, and should sit down to his supper so cheerful that Penelope could joke with him in the old way, and tell him that she thought from his looks they had concluded to pay him a hundred cents on every dollar he owed them."[9]

The people still clamor for a sign, just as they revel in the horrors that Jonathan Edwards preached; but they will not always do so. The authentic peace of Silas Lapham will yet move the hearts of men, and long after the Hebraic furies of John Barclay are forgotten.

It is worth while insisting on this point, so much has the demand for action that is virile and red-blooded done to emasculate our fiction and to keep it on the level of puerile entertainment. It is almost the business of a fiction absorbed in action to misconceive the nature of emotional crises. And especially does it busy itself disseminating the notion that tragedy and catastrophe are the circumstances most provocative of character revelation. Howells pointed out a thousand times how the inner life, which should be the humanist's chief concern, is checked and ceases in the immediate presence of catastrophe, in so far as the disaster produces any effect whatever. He further maintained that great changes in character are rare and isolated phenomena, and that when they

[9] *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884), p. 495.

do occur they are obscure in their causes and gradual in their operation. He was at great pains in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* to show how incomplete was the regeneration of Dryfoos effected by the violent death of his son Conrad, and in *New Leaf Mills* to show how much more complex an effect than reconciliation was wrought in the simple soul of Overdale, the disgruntled miller, by the rescue of his boy from drowning. I do not know that he was not excessive in his scorn of those Baphometic moments that were an unfailing resource with the older story-tellers; but that was inevitable in one whose message was so deeply concerned with the real and the inward man.

George Eliot had a great deal of this power to compel the glance inward upon the secret places of the soul, to make an inhibited impulse more impressive than an action, a potential graver than a consequence. She could on occasion make a few words of moral conviction more touching than chapters of sin and repentance. Such were the words of Maggie Tulliver, for example, when she left Stephen Guest at the inn in Mudport:

"But she raised her eyes and met his with a glance that was filled with the anguish of regret—not with yielding. 'No—not with my whole heart and soul, Stephen,' she said, with timid resolution. 'I have never consented to it with my whole mind. There are memories and affections, and longings after perfect goodness, that have such a strong hold on me; they would never quit me for long; they would come back and be pain to me—repentance. I couldn't live in peace if I put the shadow of a wilful sin between myself and God. I have

caused sorrow already—I know—I feel it; but I have never deliberately consented to it; I have never said, "They shall suffer, that I may have joy." It has never been my will to marry you; if you were to win consent from the momentary triumph of my feeling for you, you would not have my whole soul. If I could wake back again into the time before yesterday, I would choose to be true to my calmer affections, and live without the joy of love.' "

The realism of William Dean Howells and Henry James is distinguished by its emphasis on such interior states. This is why, despite the chasmal difference that separates these two artists, even dull readers are sensible of kinship between them. This is why Howells, who could not have approved the departure of Henry James from the field of common beauties to follow what he called the "æsthetic adventure," on which many before him had been led to disaster, but which with him culminated beautifully in *The Golden Bowl,* could find in his work an "ever-deepening insight," and why James could continue his delight in Howells. This is why to the vulgar or to the youthful mind nothing is accomplished in the novels of either. The classic ineptitude about Turgeniev in George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* puts them together, and the cry of this exasperated young man over a story of James' might as well have been over one of Howells':

"Why does a woman never leave the house with her lover? Why does a man never kill a man?

Why does a man never kill himself? Why is nothing ever accomplished?''

To both of these writers the beautiful motive is more significant than the beautiful deed, the vicious motive more terrifying than crime. The lesson they have to teach in common is that what people do is of infinitely less importance than what they are.

What Henry James lost through his lack of feeling for common reality, because he found his native land dull, crude, and uninspiring, Howells gained. This one may call a sense of the integrity of life, the most precious thing shared by Howells and Balzac, whom James called his master. A fair portion of James' writing interests us only by its exceeding fineness and cunning of texture; it weaves life into a shimmering and iridescent tapestry; it is memorable in vividness, delicacy, and variety of nuance. Such a realism may without deprecation be distinguished as decadent, not degenerate in the sense of Lombroso and Nordau, but specialized, as Mr. Havelock Ellis makes clear in his study of Karl Huysmans, where he speaks of the breaking up of the whole for the benefit of its parts.[10] The classic realism of *The Rise of Silas Lapham* and *The Landlord at Lion's Head,* on the other hand, prizes more consistently the

[10] ''Technically, a decadent style is only such in relation to a classic style. It is simply a further development of a classic style, a further specialisation, the homogeneous, in Spencerian phraseology, having become heterogeneous. The first is beautiful because the parts are subordinated to the whole; the second is beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts. Among our own early prose writers Sir Thomas Browne represents the type of decadence in style. Swift's prose is classic, Pater's decadent.''—*Affirmations* (ed. 1915), p. 175.

larger contours. It is as national as Balzac; an overarching moral purpose proves it no distant kin to George Eliot and Hawthorne.

*Silas Lapham* is as true to the economic and social conditions of our Reconstruction Period as *César Birotteau* to the life of Paris during the Restoration. The rôle played by Mrs. Lapham is triumphantly American in its conception, just as that of Constance is perfect in its depiction of the Parisian bourgeoise, who presides at her husband's cash-desk and knows his daily sales to the sou. The American paint manufacturer yields nothing in essential simplicity, in business sense, in vanity, in hazardous social aspirations, in that family affection which is the most warmly human feature of either chronicle, to the Parisian perfumer who becomes through arduous stages similar to his the proprietor of a prosperous establishment, deputy-mayor of his arrondissement, and chevalier of the Legion of Honor. But James' self-made man, Christopher Newman of *The American,* succeeds as a fictional creation, so to speak, on his own merits. And it is because he bears so little relation to his externals—to his native land, to the common moralities, or even to his money—that he fails to sustain comparison with either of the others.

Each of the three offers us the spectacle of latent strength of character emerging under stress of adversity. But Christopher's drama, in so far as it is not peculiarly his own, is universal; it wants that power of conviction that comes from relevance to French or to American conditions. The supreme moment, when the bottom falls out

of his contemplated revenge on the Bellegardes; when, in the darkness of Notre Dame, after his walk through the Rue d'Enfer, he realizes that such things are not his game, is a spiritual crisis of universal import. It is when we inquire what is Christopher's game that his insufficiency beside César Birotteau or Silas Lapham becomes apparent. Neither his aims nor his origins are verifiable in the American commercial world he is supposed to represent. He is an artist and nothing else, an æsthetic impressionist who doesn't quite understand how to be one, an awkward recruit of Henry James. Save for his remarks on the difficulties of achieving the life of elegant leisure, his origins have slipped from view. So slight a hold do his business habits have on him that we finally cease to believe in his money at all and suspect a rich uncle somewhere in the background. Wealth like Christopher's is won by men like Silas Lapham, who glorifies the landscape with advertisements of his mineral paint, or like César Birotteau, to whom a picture of Hero and Leander suggests that the ancients did not put oil on their hair for nothing.

What makes Silas Lapham the unforgettable representative of his type—the supreme characterization of the self-made American—is that he is real inside and outside. He is as definitely attached to New England as John Barclay to Kansas and has spiritual reactions as authentic and impressive as Christopher Newman's. And in this concern for the realities both internal and external resides the secret of Howells' art and the source of his power. This appealed to him as

the condition on which the novel could be fine art and at the same time fulfill an instructional office; and realism, as I have said, presented itself to his view as a final mediation between didacticism and an art that thought it could exist for itself. He was too confident that the novel did fulfill a use ever to urge it; but he especially valued books like *Anna Karénina* and *I Malavoglia,* which bring home to us how inevitably we are part of a social order, whether that order be regarded as man-made or divine; books which present a conflict between that order and a present and personal happiness under circumstances so verifiable as to stir us into an awareness of our own capacities for good or evil. Among native works he found the novels of Mr. Robert Herrick especially full of this quickening power. "They are not only terrible," he said, "but they are terrifying in certain climaxes, such as that awful hour in 'The Common Lot,' when the architect who has 'stood in' with the jerry-builder sees the victims of his fraudulent construction drop into the roaring volcano which his 'fire-proof' edifice has become. As you look on with the wretched man, whose moral ruin has been so reasonable, so logical, you become one with him in your consciousness of like possibilities in yourself. When a novelist can do this with his reader, he has taken himself out of the category of futile villain-mongers and placed himself in the high, clear air where George Eliot discovered in our common nature her immortal Tito."[11]

[11] "Robert Herrick" in the *North American Review* (1909), 189:816.

It is the glory of George Eliot and of Tolstoi in the freest and most untrammeled reaches of their art to have translated these simple problems into vividly real, ineffaceable, and universally intelligible terms. Howells, who wings a lower flight than either, has been no less triumphant in revealing the operation of identical motives in lighter but profoundly significant aspects. His particular métier is the analysis of the moral life in its wonted routine, as it fails of the clarifying and compelling support of tremendous crises. It is, in fact, characteristic of his people to learn very little on the earthly sojourn. Those like Silas Lapham, who learn comparatively much, whose opportunities, so to speak, have been commensurate with their capacities, are rare in his work, and should be correspondingly popular with readers. His supreme artistic creation, Jeff Durgin, the landlord at Lion's Head, is a study, without parallel in our literature, of the tragedy of worldly success which meets no effective opposition, of the insidious selfishness which has its way with a nature too strong to be tempted into crime and too fortunate to be called to a reckoning with itself in any large moral crisis. It is a subtle and marvellous weighing of the imponderable—of the imponderable elements which we can observe in ourselves and our brothers making for callousness of soul and insufficient living.

This tremendous moral force with which realism has endowed modern art, so different from the false and clumsy didacticism of an earlier day, was to Howells the largest aspect of the school he championed. Veracity to life was his test of

morality in art, but it was more; it is scarcely too much to say that with him it was a religion of art. And this ethical, even religious, import of realism, so far from being at variance with its æsthetic credo, he believed the very source and origin of all sound artistry. The endeavor to be true not symbolically but actually has indeed been the greatest stimulus to technique that the art of fiction has known.

The books that Howells calls upon us to admire as perfect specimens of realistic art are those which draw a convincing power in the illustration of human conduct from a verisimilitude that is not merely national but regional, and from which all evidences of authorial manipulation have been removed. I have just mentioned Giovanni Verga's beautiful story, *I Malavoglia,* translated by Mary A. Craig under the title, *The House by the Medlar-Tree,* and to show how far the road toward perfection in these matters has been traversed there is none better. "When we talk of the great modern movement towards reality," says Howells in his introduction to the Harper translation (1890), "we speak without the documents if we leave this book out of the count, for I can think of no other novel in which the facts have been more faithfully reproduced, or with a profounder regard for the poetry that resides in facts and resides nowhere else."

The reader who approaches *I Malavoglia* in spirits for a Crawford romance will have his difficulties with the opening chapters. There, nothing is announced, simplified, isolated, or explained; no clues are thrown out to excite the curiosity. It

is an actual transportation to the little Sicilian fishing-hamlet where Padron 'Ntoni and his family, Don Silvestro, La Vespa, Cousin Agostino Goosefoot, Uncle Crucifix, Nunziata, a bewildering number, are simultaneously glimpsed at their daily occupations and gossip. By and by the reader who lives with them in Trezza learns to know them, much as he would become acquainted with the natives of any village in which he might take up a residence, through their daily acts, and the frequently misleading testimony of their neighbors. Far from a manipulator of events, Verga does not seem even a competent guide. The whole thing has been cunningly done behind the scenes, and will be avoided or promptly abandoned by those who take their delight in watching the author simplify, unify, interpret, or what not. The tragic degeneration of 'Ntoni's 'Ntoni is as obscure in its causes as that of any young friend of ours who goes to the bad. With nothing worked up for effect, it is a tragedy of thrilling interest. There is an idyllic sweetness in it, too, and humor; a tender beauty along with the darkness and sordidness. There is, as Howells points out, a profound poetry in its facts; and its sadness is the sadness of life everywhere, especially where, as among such simple peoples as those of Southern Italy and Sicily, men have not yet learned the lessons of humanity and brotherly love; and finally, its lesson is the lesson of life everywhere:

"There, as in every part of the world, and in the whole world, goodness brings not pleasure, not

happiness, but it brings peace and rest to the soul, and lightens all burdens; and the trial and the sorrow go on for good and evil alike; only, those who choose the evil have no peace."

Such supreme veracity as that of Verga imposes upon the artist a certain restriction. No observer, after a mere season of residence among them, could write as he has done of his fishermen. Verga knows his characters, inwardly and outwardly; he knows the minutiæ of their existence, their habits, their traits, and their propensities; he knows their lightest and their profoundest thought. He knows their *milieu:* every shape, every color in the eyes of his fisherfolk is seen of him; the sea they strive with is his sea; the grass beneath their feet, his grass. And every realist must, in a sense not demanded of the unifier and simplifier, *know* his characters and their *milieu.* George Eliot had her *Romola,* and Flaubert his *Salammbô,* astonishing both, and very precious in their respective values, but both artists came home to do their most realistic work.

This is, however, a topic with which the dogmatist may not be allowed to play loose. Sir Walter Besant, in his contribution to the controversy that evoked Henry James' "Art of Fiction," as well as Stevenson's not very humble remonstrance, came so near dogmatism as half to merit James' reproof. Said Besant:

"A young lady brought up in a quiet country village should avoid descriptions of garrison life; a writer whose friends and personal experiences belong to what we call the lower middle class

should carefully avoid introducing his characters into society; a South-countryman would hesitate before attempting to reproduce the North-country accent. This is a very simple rule, but one to which there should be no exception—never to go beyond your own experience."[12]

"What kind of experience is intended," asks James with some pertinence, "and where does it begin and end? Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative—much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius—it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. The young lady living in a village has only to be a damsel upon whom nothing is lost to make it quite unfair (as it seems to me) to declare to her that she shall have nothing to say about the military. Greater miracles have been seen than that, imagination assisting, she should speak the truth about some of these gentlemen."[13]

This elucidates Mr. G. K. Chesterton's sage remarks on the "godlike power of guessing," which seems to have been given young ladies like Jane Austen and Elizabeth Barrett, and which is not quite guessing after all.

There is something further to note on this topic

[12] Quoted from Clayton Hamilton's *Materials and Methods of Fiction* (1911), p. 35.
[13] *Partial Portraits* (1888), p. 388.

than the danger of dogmatism. In our country we have been made aware of some of the dangers of local color itself: it may revert to its origins in the romantic desire to add strangeness to beauty, or, what is worse, it may reduce realism to the mechanical sort of map-making that many of its detractors think it is. With our illimitable diversity of color and character, the desire for veracity that Howells did so much to awaken, has become a passion. Each individual has found a way to originality in the cultivation of his own little garden-patch, and a library of local color has resulted, descriptive in the aggregate of the entire continent; exactitude has been made a cult; an error in the matter of a bit of costume, a turn of speech, a rock, a plant, a bird, or a tree, has become a serious literary offense. One debates the origins and authenticity of provincial terms and customs through the newspapers.

Let us not forget, however, now that the reaction against this mechanical accuracy has set in, that whatever may be said to ridicule it, it is the expression of a spirit that penetrates to the heart of literary endeavor. With it has come a new technique, which promises a perfection of artistry, and, more wonderful than all else, that spirit of humanity and democracy in literature which was to Howells the very soul of realism. Nothing in our literary history appeared to him quite so amazing as the promptitude with which the effete romanticism of the South, so direly afflicted with what Mark Twain used to call the Walter Scott disease, when once it took the breath of a realistic life, abandoned its former absurdities, and became

great in our literature. Yet this, he believed, must always happen when the sense for the real is awakened and the pilgrimage to the shrine of Truth begun. Out-worn ideals are discredited; "literature (Howells' translation from De Sanctis, the historian of Italian letters) undergoes transformation. The ugly stands beside the beautiful; or rather, there is no longer ugly or beautiful, neither ideal nor real, neither infinite nor finite. . . . There is but one thing only, the Living." Much of the regional fiction developed under the sponsorship of Howells may presently pass into literary history, but it will not pass without leaving us a spiritual heritage.

Many who have come to concede the superior power of real life to unified and simplified life, have but imperfectly grasped another and a more technical matter. In praising Verga for withholding his hand from the manipulation of events, we but suggested the superb reticence with which he refrains from any comment upon them or upon the persons implicated in them. "He seems to have no more sense of authority or supremacy concerning the personages," says Howells in his beautiful introduction to *The House by the Medlar-Tree,* "than any one of them would have in telling the story, and he has as completely freed himself from literosity as the most unlettered among them." The thoroughly modern artist, who holds himself related to the scientist, remains an impassive witness of his drama; his ideal he describes as one of objectivity, detachment, self-obliteration. Since Howells has made many critical enemies by his insistence on this

point, it may be well to begin by enumerating a few of the things that this ideal does not imply. It is perhaps unnecessary to explain that objectivity does not seek to limit the fictive art to what is decried as "mere photography," which usually comes down to mean depiction through the media of things perceptible to the five senses. There is no such art outside the minds of those who think realism an abandonment of the principle of selection. It ought to be stated, however, that this ideal does not deprive the novelist of his power of judgment; it requires him to preserve the integrity of his genre and if he wish to discourse on ethics or sociology or in any wise to state critically the truths he has discovered, to provide himself with a preface. It is a very different thing from Howells' proposal to deny the critic the right to pass judgment on works of art. A representation of life that achieves the condition of art is necessarily a criticism of life, and the personal explanation of the author could not make it any the more so. Nor can self-obliteration, despite the destructive sound of the word, make an author's work any the less his own—any the less, as Samuel Butler expresses it, his portrait. No valuable personal qualities are sacrificed in withdrawing an artist's license to plead, explain, excuse, or interpret. In fact, it is difficult to find the admonition to detachment a restriction in any sense: it is a counsel of perfection in the technique of pure narrative.

Comments and judgments like those of Thackeray, sometimes highly valued as expressions of the author's personality, have no longer a place in

representative art. A dramatist, Howells went so far as to say in the passage that brought him most notoriety, would scarcely commit a more grievous artistic sin should he spring upon the boards during the presentation of his play and explain the action to the audience or blame his characters publicly for their misdeeds. Such manifestations of personality are destructive not merely of artistic illusion but of confidence in the artist's fairness. It is only when the fictive materials are disposed with such consummate artistry that the awkward explanation and interpretation countenanced by literary convention do not stand between the most sensitive reader and the pictured page, that we feel a perfect security in the author's sense of justice. Just as localism in its true sense furnishes an assurance of human quality in an author's materials, so impersonality in manner affords an index to his impartiality in the disposition of them. Howells indeed found Thackeray's mannerisms, far from deepening the illusion, as Mr. Brownell maintained in his spirited essay,[14] not merely distracting, but definitely associated with the great Victorian's propensities to sentimentalism and satire.

It is the crowning tribute to Thackeray's greatness as an artist, thinks Howells, that he succeeded in being poignantly dramatic in spite of his tendency "to stand about in his scene, talking

[14] *Victorian Prose Masters* (1901), the entire essay, but especially pp. 9ff. It should be mentioned that Mr. Brownell affords a distinguished exception to the rule by which the generality of Thackeray's defenders have, as Professor Brander Matthews complains, ignored the issue and argued on the ground of virtues that no one is disposed to deny.

it over with his hands in his pockets, interrupting the action, and spoiling the illusion in which alone the truth of art resides."[15] His most perfect character, Becky Sharp, actually succeeds in spite of her creator. He tries in vain to distract us by nudges, whispers, and even shouts:

"He is boisterously sarcastic at her expense, as if she were responsible for the defects of her nature, and must be punished for her sins as well as by them. His morality regarding her is the old conventional morality which we are now a little ashamed of, but in his time and place he could scarcely have any other; after all, he was a simple soul, and strictly of his epoch. A later and subtler time must do finer justice to a woman badly born, and reared in dependence and repression; liberated from school to a world where she must fight her own way; taught the evil consciousness of the fascination which she had but which she never felt for men; married to a reprobate aristocrat not her superior in nature, and distinctly her inferior in mind; tempted by ambition and spurred by necessity the greater since she had her husband as well as herself to care for, she was predestined to the course she ran; and she could not have run any other, made as she was, so clever, so pretty, so graceful, so unprincipled."[16]

At the climax in Becky's career, when Rawdon enters unexpectedly upon her supper scene with Lord Steyne, the author, true to his finer instincts, holds his hand, and commits his work to the reader's intelligence. But there is one false and

[15] *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), p. 76.
[16] *Heroines of Fiction* (1901), I, 194.

wrong touch in this great and intense scene, explains Howells with penetrating discernment, which would leave the reader with the impression that Rawdon Crawley is somehow better than she.

Thus do authorial manners and morals go hand in hand. Taine realized their intimate connection when, in contrasting Thackeray's treatment of Becky Sharp with Balzac's of Valérie Marneffe[17] ("Balzac aime sa Valérie"), he gave currency to this line of criticism and set subsequent discussion of the topic of impersonality to revolving about the English satirist as its chief victim.

It may be noted parenthetically that while Howells has demonstrated better than any one else how manifestly Becky rises superior to her creator, he was not impressed by the possibility that in the matter of "the fascination which she had but which she never felt for men" she succumbed to suppression. Mr. George Moore and Mr. James Huneker are of the opinion that she was in this respect overpowered by her creator in the interests of mid-Victorian morality.[18]

The attitude of sympathetic detachment is the crucial feature of the Howells technique, and virtually involves the abandonment of sentimentalism and satire as novelistic moods. It was with him a native as well as an acquired attitude, his incapacity for satire being in the first instance a temperamental inheritance and in the second the result of reasoned conviction after the period of his debauchery with Pope and Thackeray, during

[17] *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* (ed. 1911), V, the entire chapter, but especially pp. 110ff.

[18] James Huneker, *Ivory Apes and Peacocks* (1915), p. 313.

which he thought that the superior attitude toward life was the literary thing. When he came to deal with the problem of social snobbery,—and it was the first seriously to engage his artistic attention, although his interest in the spiritual snobbery represented by the surviving Puritanism of New England was almost coeval with his interest in the New England aristocracy as a caste system,—he had long been convinced of the futility of satiric castigation against anything so inherent in the social system; and we find nothing of the superior attitude in his work except the great artist's natural superiority to his materials. Even the irony commonly thought requisite to the poise and control of great conscious artistry, he had refined and diluted almost to the amenities of familiar intercourse.

To the phrase "identification with common humanity" he has thus given an extremely literal meaning, a sort of scriptural interpretation. He loves whom he chasteneth. In a sense, Howells loves even the Reverend David Sewell, the most unlovely figure in all his works, with the exception of Mrs. Sewell. Through that slough of conscience and piety, *The Minister's Charge,* he drags him, with all the soil of his cant, his deference to his wife, his tactless blundering upon him, yet full of friendliness to him, and brings him at last in his great sermon very near to his own belief "that you can have a righteous public only by the slow process of having righteous men and women." He never satirizes a social or a vocational class, with such possible minor exceptions as hotel clerks, who as a race, one gathers from

his novels, are given over to insolence and effrontery. The only human trait enduringly offensive to him is "freshness" in young men; consequently, his heroes prevailingly lack aggressiveness and initiative, while his bad young men are oversupplied with these qualities. His tolerance is all but universal, and his books can not be intelligently read without a secure grasp of this central and distinguishing feature.

A "self-identification" that has reacted much to the disfavor of Howells as an author is that which made him a part of the Boston society he so amazingly portrayed. This more than any other has sown the history of Howells appreciation with amusing misinterpretations. It goes without saying that the Boston that read him in the eighties and made an "issue" of him, pretty largely misread him. He has himself told of his difficulties in persuading Francis Parkman that the rise of Silas Lapham was not a social one. In fact, he never succeeded in persuading the great historian; he lived the offense down. The ladies of the seventies, according to the solemn and awful report of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, confidently awaited a sequel to *A Chance Acquaintance* that should settle matters more advantageously to the fortunes of Mr. Miles Arbuton, that most wonderful donkey who ever represented a city or a social caste, and reward him with the hand of pretty Kitty Ellison, whom he had so boorishly treated. It is now the vogue to discover in the fact that Howells' creations were at all acceptable to the ladies of Boston a serious infirmity of spirit, and to hold it up against him

almost as a final judgment of his work that he appreciated and commemorated those qualities of "exquisiteness" and "respectability" fostered by that unofficial aristocracy he knew so well. The undoing of Howells, we are assured, was that "he kowtowed to the stuffy nabobs of Boston," that in the circle of Lowell he found an intellectual haven in which the inquiry promised by his genius was effectually stilled. This fashion too will disappear before a deeper comprehension of his methods of "square dealing." For, while Howells accorded his subjects a complete and impartial acceptance, there was ever in the impulse behind his portraiture a feeling for the humanity that was alien to them.

The Howells method, in a word, represents the most modern stage of pure artistry, but it does not in any wise answer the current demand that the novelist create new social values. It is not within its scope to debate the validity of moral concepts but the relation of men to them. Its criticism of the social order is conducted from within instead of from without. It measures each society by the best in itself, but does not permit any social body to confer a final judgment on itself. It aims at the sympathetic enlargement that comes from understanding everything from its own point of view. The subtleties of such an artistic intention, an intention as different as possible from that, let us say, of Mr. H. G. Wells, are altogether too easily ignored at the present time, especially when applied to such social phenomena as the aristocracy of Boston, the plutocracy of New York, and the native Puritanism and Philis-

tinism at a variety of times and places. It is quite unfair to judge *A Modern Instance* or *The Rise of Silas Lapham* as if they came from the pen of Mr. Wells, to identify as the author's incompetence to handle his situation the natural incompetence of the Athertons, who represent the social opinion of a community and an epoch, to solve the final situation of *A Modern Instance,* or to take the canting speculations of the Reverend David Sewell, who represents the best religious opinion of the same community and epoch, as the last word of the author on the ways of Providence with Silas Lapham. The purpose and, rightly considered, the effect of these conclusions is to record standards, not to conform to them or to sanction them. And this condition as time goes on cannot but work for the permanence of these great novels.

# V

## HIS POETRY AND TRAVELS

HOWELLS' contribution to miscellaneous literature, that is, literature exclusive of the fiction—novels, stories, and plays—upon which his reputation depends, is enormous. For this brief chapter, which is rather in the nature of an intermezzo, I choose two forms that he consistently cultivated, the one for which he was strongly to be suspected of having a predilection, and the one for which I certainly have. In no other department of his work do I get so fine and so complete a sense of his authorship as in these companionable and wholly delectable volumes of Italian, Spanish, and English wanderings. His poetry, on the other hand, is a thing apart. This is necessarily so, since his *maîtresse qualité* of wholesouled geniality is fatally absent from his verse. But to say that it inadequately represents him, is to understate the case. It represents better the literosity of his youth at which he later poked fun. It displaces the humanity which informs every page of his prose with an intensely personal threnody on the sadness of the human lot.

The aspirations of his youth were altogether toward poetry. Of the time (1860) of the memorable New England pilgrimage, he writes: "Inwardly I was a poet, with no wish to be anything

else, unless in a moment of careless affluence I might so far forget myself as to be a novelist. I was, with my friend J. J. Piatt, the half-author of a little volume of very unknown verse, and Mr. Lowell had lately accepted and had begun to print in the *Atlantic Monthly* five or six poems of mine. Besides this I had written poems, and sketches, and criticisms for the *Saturday Press* of New York, a long-forgotten but once very lively expression of literary intention in an extinct bohemia of that city; and I was always writing poems, and sketches, and criticisms in our own paper."[1]

The *Poems of Two Friends* (1860) alluded to, did not quite, as he somewhere else depreciatingly avers, become "instantly and lastingly unknown to fame." Lowell noticed the book in the *Atlantic,* albeit without the enthusiasm he came later to indulge for one of its authors. Nevertheless, it is now the property of bibliophiles, being the rarest with one exception of the Howells books. It has a history to delight collectors. Lida R. McCabe is authority for the statement that (1898) Howells himself did not possess a copy.[2] Its failure, however, did not dishearten the young poet; he composed assiduously during his Venetian consulate, and assaulted with little success editorial offices on both sides of the water. After his return, when he became an editor himself, publication seems to have come more easily; and in 1869 *No Love Lost, a Romance of Travel,* in his favorite hexameters,

[1] *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), p. 1.

[2] Lida R. McCabe, "One Never Can Tell," in the *Outlook* (1898), 59:131. *Niagara Revisited* is the first of the Howells books in order of rarity, and the first edition of *Venetian Life* comes third.

was reprinted from *Putnam's Magazine* in the form of a little gift book. This booklet is also somewhat rare, the copy I use having been acquired, according to the librarian's annotation in 1899, at an expense of two dollars and fifty cents. The work, however, survives in the latest edition of the *Poems.* These *Poems* were first collected in 1873, and have enjoyed two subsequent editions with slight alteration of contents (1885 and 1901). Two other volumes of single authorship are devoted to verse, *Stops of Various Quills* (1895), and *The Mother and the Father; Dramatic Passages* (1909); while recent specimens are included in the prose and verse miscellany, *The Daughter of the Storage* (1916).

The early productions are redolent of Heine and Longfellow, Heine dominating those in lyric mood, which frequently suggest Longfellow's translations from the German. The Heinesque manner and atmosphere are tempered by the lingering pathos of the American poet, whose influence is more clearly discernible in the narrative numbers. The perfection of form, the compression, and the poignancy of the Heine *lieder* are seldom attained in these lyrics. Metrically, they are surprisingly uneven, coming from one so ardently trained in the school of Pope. It seems a little odd that Lowell should strenuously have objected to the coinage "silvern" (on analogy with golden, leathern, and the like) in the stanza which follows, and should not have suggested a more ingratiating rhythmical effect:

> "The silvern chords of the piano trembled
> Still with the music wrung

From them; the silence of the room dissembled
The closes of the songs that she had sung."[3]

The pieces are seldom marred by harsh or faulty lines, but as seldom rise to high distinction. In some, such as "Pleasure-Pain" ("Das Vergnügen ist Nichts als ein höchst angenehmer Schmerz,"—Heine),[4] the lyric mood and the lyric measure sustain each other over a considerable length.

Of the narrative poems, "The Pilot's Story," though by no means the best, is by far the best known, owing to the quite comprehensible vogue which it enjoyed in its day. It was widely exchanged, sometimes to the youthful poet's chagrin, being printed as prose. Lincoln's secretaries, Hay and Nicolay, knew young Howells as its author, not merely as the author of the *Life of Lincoln,* which was their immediate concern. It recounts through the lips of a Mississippi pilot a melodramatic episode depicting the horrors of slavery. Louise, a beautiful octoroon, is gambled away at monte to a villain of long black hair and moustaches. Overwhelmed by this confession from her weak master, who had promised her her freedom for the sake of their little boy in Saint Louis, and terrified at the approach of the gambler, she hurls herself from the stern of the steamer and is plowed under by the wheel.

The poem came upon the mid-century revival of the hexameter, established in this country by Longfellow; and Howells never outgrew the penchant he then acquired for the meter. In the

[3] "Forlorn" in *Poems* (Houghton Ed. 1901), p. 13.
[4] *Ibid.,* p. 19.

descriptive interlude and conclusion, the master has his inning. The rhythm is not bad in simple and straightforward passages, but the imagery is far less felicitously conceived than is Longfellow's wont. Critics who carp at the tendency of Longfellow to strain a simile will not be pleased with the metrical tales of Howells. For my part, I have never consented to hear maligned the boldness in simplicity of some of the Longfellow metaphors.

"Silently one by one, in the infinite meadows of heaven,
Blossomed the lovely stars, the forget-me-nots of the angels."

This in "The Pilot's Story," however, lapses easily into banality:

"Softly the sunset had faded, and now on the eastern horizon
Hung, like a tear in the sky, the beautiful star of the evening." [5]

"Louis Lebeau's Conversion," "Clement," and others of the sketches and tales are saturate with *Evangeline*. But Howells reinforced the impulse to write hexameters given by Longfellow, going, as did Bayard Taylor, directly to the eighteenth-century German popularizers of the measure. He studied Kingsley's *Andromeda* also, but the influence of this, the supreme English exemplar, is hardly to be detected in his handling. The sketch entitled "The Movers" is reminiscent of *Hermann und Dorothea*.

[5] *Poems* (Houghton Ed. 1901), p. 9.

"Parting was over at last, and all the good-bys had been spoken.
Up the long hillside road the white-tented wagon moved slowly,
Bearing the mother and children, while onward before them the father
Trudged with his gun on his arm, and the faithful house-dog beside him,
Grave and sedate, as if knowing the sorrowful thoughts of his master.

"April was in her prime, and the day in its dewy awaking:
Like a great flower, afar on the crest of the eastern woodland,
Goldenly bloomed the sun, and over the beautiful valley,
Dim with its dew and shadow, and bright with its dream of a river,
Looked to the western hills, and shone on the humble procession,
Paining with splendor the children's eyes, and the heart of the mother." [6]

Tennyson, almost a twin-idol with Longfellow, contributes somewhat to the versification, but his effect is more clearly discernible in the sentiment. It is when in *Stops of Various Quills* the mood of doubt struggling with belief becomes a dominant motif, that Tennyson comes into his own. Our poet was never a Browning enthusiast; but the roughness of "No Love Lost," the poem curiously chosen for separate publication, savors more of Browning than of any other master we have mentioned, without, however, attaining Browning's weight, virility, or choiceness. I quote the envoy, which is the realistic touch to this very romantic tale; but that fact does not account for the meter:

"Well, I'm glad, I am sure, if Fanny supposes she's happy.
I've no doubt her lover is good and noble—as men go.

[6] *Poems* (Houghton Ed. 1901), p. 115.

But, as regards his release of a woman who'd
wholly forgot him,
And whom he loved no longer, for one whom he
loves, and who loves him,
*I* don't exactly see where the *heroism* com-
mences."[7]

When we come to *Stops of Various Quills* (1895), we feel that the pessimism, so purely a literary mood as it informs the *Poems,* is assuming the cast and complexion of a philosophy. And it is all pervasive. Howard Pyle, who illustrates the book lavishly, has expressed it perfectly, albeit after the German mythological manner of the Boecklin school. The baubles of the mask, the death's head, the thorns, and the bitter chalice are its symbols. The fiddler Death, or the grim reaper with sickle and glass, stalks through its pages while angels weep and mortals bid him stay. Melancholia is written large over all. "The Bewildered Guest" is most quoted, a sonnet, of which form the book includes several specimens.

"I was not asked if I should like to come.
I have not seen my host here since I came,
Or had a word of welcome in his name.
Some say that we shall never see him, and some
That we shall see him elsewhere, and then know
Why we were bid. How long I am to stay
I have not the least notion. None, they say,
Was ever told when he should come or go.
But every now and then there bursts upon
The song and mirth a lamentable noise,
A sound of shrieks and sobs, that strikes our joys
Dumb in our breasts; and then, some one is gone.
They say we meet him. None knows where or when.
We know we shall not meet him here again."[8]

[7] *Poems* (Houghton Ed. 1901), p. 198.
[8] *Stops of Various Quills* (1895), number five. Being an art-book, the work is unpaginated.

The number immediately preceding this, "From Generation to Generation," counsels the bright throng of innocent spirits unborn to shun this evil star. But, alas, they cry in chorus:

> "The doom is on us, as it is on you,
> That nothing can undo;
> And all in vain you warn:
> As your fate is to die, our fate is to be born."

The logic is hardly worthy of a Schopenhauer, for our poet fears but a changeless grave; and the conclusion of his philosophy as voiced in "What Shall it Profit," number forty-three, is Tennysonian:

> "If I lay waste and wither up with doubt
> The blessed fields of heaven where once my faith
> Possessed itself serenely safe from death;
> If I deny the things past finding out;
> Or if I orphan my own soul of One
> That seemed a Father, and make void the place
> Within me where He dwelt in power and grace,
> What do I gain by that I have undone?"

The depth and originality of these verses will blind one to the fact that they form even as the early and imitative ones, a private pleasure ground for their author, a garden of moods. To correlate them, as some have done, with the great novels is to exaggerate their importance. The great novels like *A Hazard of New Fortunes* indeed reflect the popular pessimism of their day, but only in their minor aspects. In the presence of human scenes, Howells' sense of the real is irrepressible; and the philosophic infection is not toxic in its effect. *Stops of Various Quills,* on the

other hand, is, as he would say, strictly of its epoch. As a poet he was perfectly in the mode of the nineties.

In craftsmanship, the verse of *Stops of Various Quills* varies as widely as that of the *Poems,* but on a superior level. "Materials for a Story" and "Labor and Capital"[9] are not improved by rime. The latter is a splendid "impression," which a French poet would have put into memorable prose. "The Bewildered Guest" just quoted and the probably superior "If" (number thirteen) discover our poet at the apogee of his art, and will not be passed over by the anthologists of the future.

The impression left by the two remaining volumes is of retrogression in technique. *The Mother and the Father; Dramatic Passages,* which is arresting and altogether superior in content, realizing the emotions of a mother and a father in the presence of the great facts of birth, marriage, and death, cries as loudly for prose as did *No Love Lost,* but is happier than the Venetian tale in attaining a really excellent prose, so that it makes delightful reading. On the whole, it is less metrical than *Lorna Doone.* I cite almost at random a good conversational sentence:

> "Oh no; you only
> Said that you did not know, and I have only
> Bettered your ignorance a little and said
> I knew. Women must have some faith or other
> Even if they make a faith of disbelief."[10]

[9] *Stops of Various Quills* (1895), numbers thirty and thirty-two.
[10] *The Mother and the Father* (1909), p. 27.

*The Daughter of the Storage* (1914), which contains, among other beautiful pieces of prose, two of the gem-like farces in which its author is quite unapproachable, discloses between book-covers the lowest level to which he ever descended in the matter of metrical form. Small wonder that it should have been heralded in I fail to recall which of the New York Sunday editions by a front-page review with portrait, as Howells' initial venture into *vers libre,* and as a sort of official approval conferred by literary authority upon the free forms. Unfortunately, this reviewer was mistaken. There is not an authentic piece of *vers libre* in the collection. I say this, however, with a confidence which I do not feel in ascribing specific metrical intentions to individual poems. I can maintain only to be personally persuaded that "Captain Dunlevy's Last Trip" is in no other meter than our old favorite hexameter; and Southey never did worse by it.

"It was against the law, in such case made and provided,
Of the United States, but by the good will of the pilots
That we would some of us climb to the pilot-house after our breakfast
For a morning smoke, and find ourselves seats on the benching."[11]

"The Face at the Window"[12] shows clearly a return to its author's first love, the heroic couplet:

[11] *The Daughter of the Storage* (1914), p. 67.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 107.

"He had gone down at Christmas, where our host
Had opened up his house on the Maine coast
For the week's holidays, and we were all,
On Christmas night, sitting in the great hall."

A diary recently recovered in a storage warehouse and used by Howells in the composition of *Years of My Youth* furnished an interesting specimen of the early Popeian imitations. "I have no facts to support my conjecture," he remarks in submitting it, "but I will hazard the belief that the winter of 1851–2 was largely given to producing and polishing this plaster-of-paris masterpiece." He forbears mockery out of reverence for the boy who long ago strove so fervently to realize an ideal, albeit an ideal which the man branded as false. However, I will go into court and say in defence of the same boy that his pastoral, imitative though it be, makes better reading than "The Face at the Window." One does not have to lower one's evaluation of the informing ideal one jot in saying that in the presence of so abysmal a technical falling off it must content itself with second place. I can scarce forbear repeating all we have of the pastoral, which concerns one Corydon, in evidence of this. I give, however, only young Corydon's first round at the song; his competitors, unhappily, do not appear:

"Now ceases Philomel her nightly strain,
And trembling stars forsake the ethereal plain;
Pale Luna fades and down the distant West
Sadly and slowly lowers her rayless crest;
But yellow Phœbus pours his beams along
And linnets sport where Philomela sung.
Here robins chirp and joyful orioles sing
Where late the owlet flapped his noiseless wing;

Here the pale lily spreads its petals wide,
And snowy daisies deck the green hillside;
Here violets' bloom with waterflowers wreath,
And forest blossoms scent the Zephyr's breath.
Fit spot for song where Spring in every flower
Rich incense offers to the morning hour.
Then let us sing! The hour is meet for love,
The plain, the vale, the music-breathing grove;
Let gentle Daphnis judge the doubtful song,
And soft Æolus bear the notes along.
I stake my pipe with whose soft notes I while
The tedious hours, and my toil beguile;
Whose mellow voice gives joy serener charms,
And grief of half its bitterness disarms." [13]

In taking leave of the poetry and turning to the books of travel, we approach something inconceivably different, something that those who would make much of Howells' pessimism should omit from the count. Beggars, indeed, touch his sensibilities keenly, but one must go to the sociological essays to prove that they becloud his *Weltanschauung*. Each record of his wanderings pays fresh tribute to the youth and vitality that were ever associated with him. I complained that his poetry does not fairly represent him, and that its technical deficiencies sometimes prohibit enjoyment. In both respects the travels are antipodal. His ingratiating prose is here to be enjoyed at its best, its very best; and, so far from constituting, so to speak, a private department of his work, these volumes are all of a piece with it. A persistence of the early and unnative literary ideal seems to have vitiated his poetry, while in the sketches of travel he developed the native and sterling qualities that characterized his fiction. It

[13] *Years of My Youth* (1916), pp. 76-77.

is a significant fact that the fiction had its genesis in these sketches of travel, the first novel, *Their Wedding Journey,* being nothing more nor less than a magnified sketch. The reason is not obscure, since a special province of his lies in the depiction of manners, and in the handling of the lighter revelations of character, or, as the injudicious will have it, the depiction of externals and the handling of superficial aspects.

In these sketches, begun with a journalistic intent, he achieved a contact with reality which his more "literary" verse was incapable of affording. This he did not see very clearly, so firmly had been ingrained the notion that poetry was *the* occupation for a literary man. His earliest reading and writing had been poetry; the first literary heroes he met in the flesh were poets, men like Bayard Taylor,—the very first,—Lowell, and Longfellow. Indeed, when he joined the circle of the New England elect, he found the type of literary man to be the poet. Difficult, therefore, as it may be to understand why he was born for mediocrity in versification, it is not at all difficult to understand why he should so long have failed to recognize in himself the consummate prosateur that he was. Lowell felt this better than he. The phenomenon is repeated in his hesitancy in making the transition from the simpler style of prose narrative displayed in these chronicles to the more highly organized type represented by the novels.

I cannot say that these writings will ever add greatly to his reputation. He who would hazard such a prediction should first ask to see what

records of actual travel have resisted the tooth of time. What has put a blight upon this charming genre, so that its choicest specimen will perish before the time of a second-rate novel or a *voyage imaginaire?* The sufficient fact is, I suppose, as Howells realized when he did make the transition to fiction, that the great and permanent interest of mankind is in man, in the study of human character; and in dealing solely with the actual the author is handicapped in this study, the real in the novelist's sense having nothing to do with the actual. He once told us how he abandoned a great subject because its facts interfered with the fictional mask, without which, he asserted, one cannot give "the living complexion of events."

The letters which became *Venetian Life* appeared first in the *Boston Advertiser,* having been vainly offered "to more æsthetic periodicals," [14] and at once enlisted the admiration of Howells' diplomatic chief, John Lothrop Motley, the historian, and of Lowell, who wrote: "They make the most careful and picturesque *study* I have ever seen on any part of Italy. They are the thing itself." [15] There could certainly be no higher praise than this, considering the plethoric literature about Italy, especially Venice, quantities of which must have been known to the Italianate Lowell. The publication of these letters in book form (1866) laid the foundation for Howells' literary success, and so frequently is misunderstanding displayed concerning the facts of that

[14] *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), p. 92.
[15] Quoted from "Lowell and Howells," in *Harper's Weekly* (1902), 46:101.

transaction that I am going to give the account in his own words.

"Before I left Venice I had made my sketches into a book, which I sent on to Messrs. Trübner & Co., in London. They had consented to look at it to oblige my friend Conway, who during his sojourn with us in Venice, before his settlement in London, had been forced to listen to some of it. They answered me in due time that they would publish an edition of a thousand, at half profits, if I could get some American house to take five hundred copies. When I stopped in London I had so little hope of being able to do this that I asked the Trübners if I might, without losing their offer, try to get some other London house to publish my book. They said Yes, almost joyously; and I began to take my manuscript about. At most places they would not look at me or it, and they nowhere consented to read it. The house promptest in refusing to consider it afterwards pirated one of my novels, and with some expressions of good intention in that direction, never paid me anything for it; though I believe the English still think that this sort of behavior was peculiar to the American publisher in the old buccaneering times. I was glad to go back to the Trübners with my book, and on my way across the Atlantic I met a publisher who finally agreed to take those five hundred copies. This was Mr. M. M. Hurd, of Hurd and Houghton, a house then newly established in New York and Cambridge. We played ring-toss and shuffleboard together, and became of a friendship which lasts to this day. But it was not till some months later, when I saw him in New York, that he consented to publish my book. I remember how he said, with an air of

vague misgiving, and an effect of trying to justify himself in an imprudence, that it was not a great matter anyway. I perceived that he had no faith in it, and to tell the truth I had not much myself. But the book had an instant success, and it has gone on from edition to edition ever since. There was just then the interest of a not wholly generous surprise at American things among the English. Our success in putting down the great Confederate rebellion had caught the fancy of our cousins, and I think it was to this mood of theirs that I owed largely the kindness they showed my book. There were long and cordial reviews in all the great London journals, which I used to carry about with me like love-letters; when I tried to show them to other people, I could not understand their coldness concerning them."[16]

The following year (1867) Hurd followed up the success of *Venetian Life* with *Italian Journeys,* some half dozen papers of which had appeared in the *Nation* after being returned unprinted by the *Advertiser*—unæsthetic journal too! The long and scholarly article on "Ducal Mantua" is from the *North American Review* for January, 1866. The next *bona fide* travel book, *Tuscan Cities* (1886), is a worthy sequel to *Italian Journeys.* In 1892 Messrs. Harper added to their "Black and White" series *A Little Swiss Sojourn,* in the Canton Vaud, at Montreux, Vevay and Villeneuve. Beginning with *London Films* (1905), a book that leaves one with lasting regret that Howells did not find Paris a field for his "mental kodak," they come apace: *Certain*

[16] *Literary Friends and Acquaintance* (1900), p. 101.

*Delightful English Towns; with Glimpses of the Pleasant Country Between* (1906), *Roman Holidays, and Others* (1908), *Seven English Cities* (1909), and *Familiar Spanish Travels* (1913)—to which must be added *The Seen and Unseen at Stratford-on-Avon; a Fantasy* (1914), although the delight of that book lies in its fantastic satire on the Baconian authorship theory, and *Hither and Thither in Germany* (1920), although the material of that book had already done service in *Their Silver Wedding Journey.*

It is alleged by those who find Howells a romancer who repressed his natural proclivities in order to be "in the movement," that the earliest volume, *Venetian Life,* is suffused with a certain "glow" which is lacking in the later ones. Mr. Pattee makes something of the point,[17] and Howells himself, I believe, let fall a few remarks to color the charge. Now, the detection of this aura is in all probability a matter too impressionistic in character to be made the subject of controversy. It may well be that my organ for perceiving it has undergone sclerosis. I can only say, therefore, that I am able to detect no quality in *Venetian Life* that does not abound in the succeeding works. There is as much exotic color in *Familiar Spanish Travels,* and what that book may lack in exuberant spirits is amply made up in *Certain Delightful English Towns.* The wonder is, in very fact, how any traveler, whatever his æsthetic persuasion, could have maintained such joy in the foreign scene.

[17] *A History of American Literature Since 1870* (1915), pp. 197-219.

Moreover, *Venetian Life* is a document as rich as any other in disillusion. If the "glow" is conceived to consist in an abrogation of the Heinesque trick of disillusionment (I reiterate, I do not know in what it is supposed to consist), the early work has small claim indeed to its possession; for this trick is essentially a mannerism of youth which becomes presently more discreet. To observe it at its baldest, one must see the letters written to the Cincinnati *Gazette,* which preceded the Venetian letters; and when we come to the very late English books it is tempered by a noticeable infusion of Washington Irving. It may confidently be called a mannerism, for our author's resemblances to Heine are in reality exceedingly superficial. He cannot hate; at any rate he cannot bite swiftly and keenly; but more than all else, he lacks Heine's power of sustained emotion. He has, in fact, a more natural affinity in Daudet; for often when he is most critical he is most truly *simpatico.* But the mood, such as it is, is characteristic of all the travel books. He has never ceased to be amusingly critical of the emotions of himself and of others. In *Venetian Life* we have as little moonshine as anywhere else, an even more deliberate hand than usual being brought to the demolition of the romantic Italy of Byron.

Howells seldom passes up an opportunity for a jibe at the noble lord. He has been ungenerous enough to attempt a blot at the splendor of the bard's reputation as a swimmer. *Childe Harold* appears to be his *vade mecum* of what not to feel in Italy. The lament

"In Venice Tasso's echoes are no more,
And silent rows the songless gondolier"

is clearly the inspiration of the following bit of archery, in which he draws a bow as long as does the sentimental pilgrim:

"As for the singing of the gondoliers, they are the only class of Venetians who have not good voices, and I am scarcely inclined to regret the silence which long ago fell upon them. I am quite satisfied with the peculiar note of warning which they utter as they approach the corner of a canal, and which meaning simply, 'To the Right,' or 'To the Left,' is the most pathetic and melancholy sound in the world. If, putting aside my own comfort, I have sometimes wished for the sake of a dear, sentimental old friend at home, who loves such idle illusions with an ardor unbecoming his years, that I might hear the voice

'of Adria's gondolier,
By distance mellowed, o'er the waters sweep,'

I must still confess that I never did hear it under similar circumstances, except in conversation across half a mile of lagoon, when, as usual, the burden of the lay was polenta or soldi."[18]

Sometimes rudely and sometimes tenderly the cherished illusions are laid to rest. The rudeness of the sentimental pilgrimage to the "Prigione di Tasso" in Ferrara, "the coal-cellar in which was never imprisoned the poet whose works I had not

[18] *Venetian Life* (ed. 1896), p. 337.

read,'' [19] is in part owing to the fact that it concerns one of the dungeons where the noble bard had himself locked up. This is recounted in the *Italian Journeys,* on the whole a more enjoyable book than *Venetian Life.* The humor is airier. I should not know where to match the lugubrious voyage from Genoa to Naples, on which they envied ''the bones of the Venetians, Pisans, and Genoese who met and slew each other in the long-forgotten sea-fights, and sank too deeply through the waves to be stirred by their restless tumult,'' [20] unless it would be in Daudet, with the doleful crossing of Tartarin of Tarascon, when that dauntless hunter set out to depopulate Africa of lions.

As a painter of sky and sea, Howells is not inimitable. The magic canvas of Pierre Loti is not for him; and the chromatics of Gautier are beyond the resources of his palette. He seldom evokes an atmosphere with the swift saliency of De Maupassant, or lingers in the descriptive mood with the loving eye of a plastic artist as does Henry James, who learned the secrets of light from the impressionistic painters. He attains an idyllic touch in the English books, but the chief charm of his work resides in the vivid sense of reality which accrues from the cinematographic succession of images. ''I try to give the reader,'' he confesses in *Tuscan Cities,* ''a true impression of the sweet confusion of travel in those old lands.'' [21] And this book displays more clearly

[19] *Italian Journeys* (ed. 1896), p. 14.
[20] *Ibid.,* p. 69.
[21] *Tuscan Cities* (ed. 1894), p. 222.

than any other perhaps his deftness in catching the fleeting bit of life or scene, so pregnant, and so elusive: a cab-driver, a vender with his tray of Chianti flasks, a weather-beaten fragment of statuary, a group of cypresses, or an anemone blowing in the March wind. The episodic dramas of the street attract him mightily, out of all proportion, some will say, to their significance; and he is superbly happy in depicting the color and movement of crowds.

Some will be disappointed that Howells is so little a technician in the other arts than his own. But we surely suffer no dearth of technical writing on Italian painting, and should be properly grateful that Howells has been true to himself in refraining from any kind of ready-made appreciation. On this point, Maurice Hewlett is in accord, the burden of whose preambulatory remarks to *The Road in Tuscany* is: "Let cooks take delight in the mixing of dishes, but let gentlemen eat of them." As for describing architecture, Howells holds it a sin, if not a bore. On the other hand, he is an authority on the fine art of mendicancy in its protean forms, and a connoisseur in birds and flowers. Yet in regard to the scenic properties of architecture, I am going to say that his lively appreciation is fertile not only in conceiving just characterizations, as often as not in the form of droll personifications, but in indicating points of view that have escaped more sophisticated observers.

The all-pervading characteristic of his descriptive method is his inability to keep the human element out of the landscape for even a paragraph

of moderate length. Of course, scene-painting as we come upon it in Radcliffe, Scott, and Cooper, is a lost art, but Henry James and Mrs. Edith Wharton, not to mention Mr. Kipling and Mr. Conrad, do enthrall the reader in his own emotions, making him directly the spectator. Howells interestingly makes one of his characters express a skepticism of this procedure so far as the drama is concerned; but the passage is more interesting in its applicability not only to his own novels but even to these books of travel. It occurs in *The Story of a Play,* as Maxwell the playwright and his Louise sit swinging on their cottage veranda:

"... The sea came and went among the rocks below, marking its course in the deepening twilight with a white rope of foam, and raving huskily to itself, with now and then the long plunge of some heavier surge against the bowlders, and a hoarse shout. The Portland boat swam by in the offing, a glitter of irregular lights, and the lamps on the different points of the Cape blinked as they revolved in their towers. 'This is the kind of thing you can get only in a novel,' said Maxwell, musingly. 'You couldn't possibly give the feeling of it in a play.'

" 'Couldn't you give the feeling of the people looking at it?' suggested his wife, and she put out her hand to lay it on his. 'Yes, you could do that,' he assented, with pleasure in her notion; 'and that would be better. I suppose that is what would be aimed at in a description of the scene, which would be tiresome if it didn't give the feeling of the spectator.' "[22]

[22] *The Story of a Play* (1898), p. 29

It is the feeling of the spectator in the playwright's sense that is seldom wanting in Howells' scene. People are an obsession with him; when they are long absent, he goes into the byways and hedges and compels them to come in. Or if he forsakes the midday throng to view a city in the silence of night, he steals back almost before one is aware. This is what he does at Carlsbad in *Their Silver Wedding Journey,* but I prefer to give an example from *Venetian Life:*

". . . I remember distinctly among the beautiful nights of that time, the soft night of late winter which first showed me the scene you may behold from the Public Gardens at the end of the long concave line of the Riva degli Schiavoni. Lounging there upon the southern parapet of the Gardens, I turned from the dim bell-towers of the evanescent islands in the east (a solitary gondola gliding across the calm of the water, and striking its moonlight silver into multitudinous ripples), and glanced athwart the vague shipping in the basin of St. Mark, and saw all the lights from the Piazzetta to the Giudecca, making a crescent of flame in the air, and casting deep into the water under them a crimson glory that sank also down and down in my own heart, and illumined all its memories of beauty and delight. Behind these lamps rose the shadowy masses of church and palace; the moon stood bright and full in the heavens, the gondola drifted away to the northward; the islands of the lagoons seemed to rise and sink with the light palpitations of the waves like pictures on the undulating fields of banners; the stark rigging of a ship showed black against the sky; the Lido sank from sight upon the east,

as if the shore had composed itself to sleep by the side of its beloved sea to the music of the surge that gently beat its sands; the yet leafless boughs of the trees above me stirred themselves together, and out of one of those trembling towers in the lagoons, one rich, full sob burst from the heart of a bell, too deeply stricken with the glory of the scene, and suffused the languid night with the murmur of luxurious, ineffable sadness.

"But there is a perfect democracy in the realm of the beautiful, and whatsoever pleases is equal to any other thing there, no matter how low its origin or humble its composition; and the magnificence of that moonlight scene gave me no deeper joy than I won from the fine spectacle of an old man whom I saw burning coffee one night in the little court behind my lodgings, and whom I recollect now as one of the most interesting people I saw in my first days at Venice. All day long the air of that neighborhood had reeked with the odors of the fragrant berry, and all day long this patient old man—sage, let me call him—had turned the sheet-iron cylinder in which it was roasting over an open fire after the picturesque fashion of roasting coffee in Venice. Now that the night had fallen, and the stars shone down upon him, and the red of the flame luridly illumined him, he showed more grand and venerable than ever. Simple, abstract humanity has its own grandeur in Italy; and it is not hard here for the artist to find the primitive types with which genius loves best to deal. As for this old man, he had the beard of a saint, and the dignity of a senator, harmonized with the squalor of a beggar, superior to which shone his abstract, unconscious grandeur of humanity. A vast and calm melancholy, which had nothing to do with burning cof-

fee, dwelt in his aspect and attitude; and if he had been some dread supernatural agency, turning the wheel of fortune, and doing men, instead of coffee, brown, he could not have looked more sadly and weirdly impressive. When, presently, he rose from his seat, and lifted the cylinder from its place, and the clinging flames leaped after it, and he shook it, and a volume of luminous smoke enveloped him and glorified him—then I felt with secret anguish that he was beyond art, and turned sadly from the spectacle of that sublime and hopeless magnificence." [23]

I have presented these companion pieces of a night in Venice that the reader may judge for himself which challenges its author's art. The first is immeasurably the less characteristic, and even for its early period in his development has the nature of an indulgence. And this brings me to say, with regret, that Howells was so afraid of scene-painting that in *Their Silver Wedding Journey*, a work largely devoted to scenes, he apologized for a sunrise.[24] One recalls Balzac's admiration for *The Pathfinder;* but the question does not concern realism. It is an indubitable fact that the sun *does* sometimes rise in majesty. Nor must one love Man the less to insist that sometimes

"There is society where none intrudes."

A trifle less humanity on Howells' part would have dispensed with the intrusion of the sexton's son at the graves of Shelley and Keats; [25] a little

[23] *Venetian Life* (1896), pp. 33ff.
[24] *Their Silver Wedding Journey* (1899), p. 481.
[25] *Italian Journeys*, pp. 166-8.

less interest in the pilgrims at San Sebastiano and he would have breathed the true atmosphere of that shrine. The pilgrims are ubiquitous, but San Sebastiano is unique. It would be only fair, however, to match these two relative failures with places by two hundred triumphant successes with people. The elderly man who gave our travelers their information concerning "Cromwell's castle" is certainly such a success, but the person I would have no one miss is the lady knitting who shared their compartment from Plymouth to Bristol—both acquaintanceships recorded in the ever-delightful *English Towns*. I can think of nothing better than the visit to Petrarch's house at Arquà for a fine subordination of the transient human element to its proper function of enlivening a scene of integral permanent aspects.[26]

I am loath to leave these charming books, but my chapter has already violated its promised character of an intermezzo. The reader may recall my prefatory distinction that stylistically considered the two forms which it has treated are positively antipodal. And since the travels represent our author at the apogee of his verbal art, I cannot conclude without a word on the lavishly eulogized Howells style.

Of tributes to this graceful and musical style there is no end. Even those who deny its possessor ideas are ready to promise him immortality because of it. But now, all that it is possible to say in praise of it has been finally phrased by Mark Twain, whose essay on Howells, almost

[26] *Italian Journeys*, pp. 216ff.

entirely devoted to manner, is far and away the best thing we have on the subject. His analysis of the Howells humor is something in which he speaks with authority.

"As concerns his humor, I will not try to say anything, yet I would try if I had the words that might approximately reach up to its high place. I do not think any one else can play with humorous fancies so gracefully and delicately and deliciously as he does, nor has so many to play with, nor can come so near making them look as if they were doing the playing themselves and he was not aware that they were at it. For they are unobtrusive, and quiet in their ways, and well conducted. His is a humor which flows softly all around about and over and through the mesh of the page, pervasive, refreshing, health-giving, and makes no more show and no more noise than does the circulation of the blood." [27]

He has nothing but praise for the easy-flowing rhythms which vex Mrs. Atherton,[28] not realizing, it is to be feared, how often they are antithetic to the compactness which he also praises. Professor Pitkin in his *Short Story Writing* makes a valuable suggestion concerning the noticeable psychological mannerism which inflates his style at times, albeit a suggestion that does not lack

[27] "William Dean Howells," in *Harper's* (1906), 113:223.

[28] "Mr. Howells, you know, denounces originality. He tells us to stick to the small things of life in fiction, to shun the big things. He has produced, and his followers maintain, a literary style that is all l's and n's and r's. It is the cultivation of a perfectly flat, even surface. It is afraid of rough surfaces, of mountain peaks and deep valleys."—Gertrude Atherton as reported in the New York *Times*, reviewed in *Current Literature* (1908), 44:159.

its touch of humor when later on it is advised that students cultivate vividness, clarity, and dramatic velocity by rewriting a story of Howells', stripping it of verbiage. One would rather say: read De Maupassant as a sovereign antidote. But no doubt Mr. Pitkin gives that advice as well.

I hope I shall not be suggesting that our delight in the phrasal excellencies of Howells will not be a perpetual one in saying that it is excessive to the point of falsity to credit him, as Mark Twain does, with almost every virtue of style, including a Frenchman's solicitude for the inevitable phrase. I do not think it is finding fault with his way of saying things, or even wishing his verbal manner different from what it is, to insist that he cannot be held up for the very highest standard of artistry. He suffers unjustly when measured from the heights attained in our tongue by virtuosi like Walter Pater, who took to heart the precept of Ruskin: "A book is written, not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it." The perpetuation of the voice obviously exacts both a difference of intention and a longer patience than its multiplication—a patience that Howells did not have and a difference of intention that he did not clearly understand, and against which he warned his pupils. This difference of intention Henry James had; he was consciously a stylist, *like* the style or not as you choose. Mrs. Wharton has both the artistic intent and a larger measure of deliberation than had James. Take the dawning of spring in Italy as exquisitely depicted in her *Italian Backgrounds* ("March in Italy"), as it challenged the pen of

Henry James on his "Roman Rides" (*Transatlantic Sketches* of 1893), and as Howells scattered its sweetness through the last third of *Tuscan Cities,* and observe how easily, by what we commonly know as French standards, she bears off the prize.

Howells' staggering output is sufficient warrant that he did not conceive art as a long patience, but it may be interesting to inquire somewhat more closely into his intention, his theory of style. His ideal of style in literature is, as a matter of fact, perfectly consonant with his ideal of structure. Just as the form of the novel should be free and flexible, adaptable always to the exact transcription of ordinary events, so the manner of speech should be the ordinary manner of a clear and musical speaker. Since he would not have the form distorted or molded in accord with Stevenson's "one creative and controlling thought," to which every incident and character must contribute, he could not have the style pitched "in unison with this," as the romancer bids. The eternal vigilance against the word that "looks another way," the contriving of patterns and webs of discourse, which for Stevenson make writing a fine art, appear to him of an artificiality only less dangerous than the contriving of plots.

In boyhood, he played the ape as sedulously as did the Scot; he never loved an author, he tells us, without wishing to write in his manner. He could not admire even old Chaucer without borrowing his archaic phrases. At one time he had a craze for the simple Anglo-Saxon words, despising most heartily all long Latin derivatives. "I still like

the little word," he remarks, "if it says the thing I want to say as well as the big one, but I honor above all the word that says the thing."[29] "To aim at succinctness and brevity, merely, as some teach, is to practice a kind of quackery almost as offensive as the charlatanry of rhetoric. In either case the life goes out of the subject."

He came to learn that "style is only a man's way of saying a thing,"[30] and that although one may always learn from the masters, it is quite futile to practice talking in their various manners. His advice to the youthful contributor is to "put aside all anxiety about style; that is a thing that will take care of itself; it will be added unto him if he really has something to say." He continues:

"If he has not much to say, or if he has nothing to say, perhaps he will try to say it in some other man's way, or to hide his own vacuity with rags of rhetoric and tags and fringes of manner, borrowed from this author and that. He will fancy that in this disguise his work will be more literary, and that there is somehow a quality, a grace, imparted to it which will charm in spite of the inward hollowness. His vain hope would be pitiful if it were not so shameful, but it is destined to suffer defeat at the first glance of the editorial eye.

"If he really has something to say, however, about something he knows and loves, he is in the best possible case to say it well. Still, from time to time he may advantageously call a halt, and consider whether he is saying the thing clearly

[29] *My Literary Passions* (1895), p. 112.
[30] *Literature and Life* (1902), p. 74.

and simply. If he has a good ear he will say it gracefully and musically; and I would by no means have him aim to say it barely or sparely. It is not so that people talk, who talk well, and literature is only the thought of the writer flowing from the pen instead of the tongue." [31]

Hence, Howells is convinced that we grossly overestimate the value of style as a permanent literary quality. He holds no author great or worthy of remembrance because of his manner of speech. Style he will have it is something that is added unto a writer, whether that writer be the youthful contributor or Dante or Shakespeare or Tolstoi. The psychology of this view, which is one of wide and easy currency at the present time, is beautifully appropriate to its author, but it need not be adopted literally, any more than that of the extreme classicist, who looks to style as the prime preservative of literature, or of the extreme euphuist, who carries his doctrine of unique quality and inevitable word to a length which identifies manner with matter. While we are waiting for some one adequately and finally to philosophize the problem of style, however, we have the practical truth to content us; and that lies, as usual, between extremes. A good counsel is that which would neither adjure the youthful contributor to squander his nights in quest of the inevitable word nor induce him to trust the efficacy of an occasional halt to "consider whether he is saying the thing clearly and simply." The results of the latter procedure are evident in the writing of

[31] *Literature and Life* (1902).

Howells, just as the results of Stevenson's method are evident in his writing.[32]

The fact is, that very much as Howells failed to dissociate the description of purely natural phenomena from scene-painting, he failed to dissociate style from what is known in journalistic parlance as "fine writing." The nineteenth-century euphuism which promulgated the doctrine of *la vrai vérité,* welcomed by both æsthetes and realists, took an entirely dissimilar view of the matter. "Fine writing" attaches to the Elizabethan euphuism, which ingeniously conceals thought, or tricks it out in fantastic vesture, its ideal being one of elegance; whereas the later euphuism, scientific,—pseudo-scientific, if you will,—postulates a unique essence for every idea, and strips the thought to its essence, its ideal being one of exactitude.

Howells, in practice, rises superbly superior to his convictions. He practices, as do all who write well, the principle of Flaubert, but with infinitesimally less labor. Observing no doubt that in striving for style he misses it, he cautions others not to strive. So great is his facility in the easy, almost conversational manner, that, for him, strife does not connote any endeavor to *préciser* that manner; it connotes literosity rather. When

[32] "And, on the other hand, how many do we continue to peruse and reperuse with pleasure whose only merit is elegance of texture? I am tempted to mention Cicero; and since Mr. Anthony Trollope is dead, I will. It is a poor diet for the mind, a very colorless and toothless 'criticism of life'; but we may enjoy the pleasure of a most intricate and dexterous pattern, every stitch a model at once of elegance and of good sense; and the two oranges, even if one of them be rotten, kept dancing with inimitable grace."—*On Style in Literature.*

he does go out of his way to attain style, he is very apt to throw off some image that can be branded as "literose," that takes the eye off the object, as Wordsworth explained it in his strictures on Pope. This is "style," but it would have made Flaubert cringe with horror, to the delight, no doubt, of the refractory Zola: "The wheel of the steamer was as usual chewing the sea, and finding it unpalatable, and making vain efforts at expectoration." [33] Mr. Pitkin would have his students expunge the italicized clause from the following sentence: "The sunset struck its hard red light through the fringe of leafless trees to the westward, and gave their outlines that black definition *which a French school of landscape saw a few years ago, and now seems to see no longer.*" [34] Mr. Pitkin objects quite properly that this clause, which appears to be "a sober historical allusion," is in reality "a private reminiscence," and as such is to be identified with the psychological mannerism. However it be classified, it is an evasion of the labor which a perfect stylist expends in search of *le mot juste,* a more pleasing evasion than the strained metaphor of the expectorating wheel, but an evasion none the less. One need not be hyperæsthetic to feel that the following description removes the mind's eye some thousands of miles from its object: "By and by they passed a fisherman drawing his nets, and bending from his boat, there near Albany, N.Y., in the picturesque immortal attitudes of Raphael's Galilean fisherman; and now a flush

[33] *Italian Journeys,* p. 273.
[34] *Short Story Writing* (1912), pp. 117 and 119.

mounted the pale face of the east, and through the dewy coolness of the dawn there came, more to the sight than to any other sense, a vague menace of heat.'' [35] It is quite possible that here the author wished to reflect the thoughts of his characters, rather than give his reader a pristine impression; if so, he fell a little below his own standard of doing that sort of thing; and the mannerism is none the less his very own mannerism, which he carried so far as to indicate the bodily posture and verbal accent of a character by comparison with those of an actor no longer living.

Neither was Howells concerned for the style that preserves—or is supposed to preserve—writing against the corrosion of time nor did he achieve it. His style, if simply examined with reference to its sources of interest, will be found hardly to exist outside of its author's acute feeling for men and women. Mastery of dialogue, the language of men and women, is its crowning glory. Even those hostile to Howells' social and artistic ideals will tell you that he has no competitor living or dead in this branch of the narrative art. And I have exposed in excerpts the secret of his descriptive vitality together with something of its limitations. His instinct for concrete humanity lends it the power it has and also delimits it. And the venerable figure of the Venetian coffee-burner will perhaps suffice to show how the humanity that in the concrete was an absorption with him was in the abstract an intoxication. For he loved Man not only as Chaucer loved him, but as Spinoza loved God.

[35] *Their Wedding Journey* (ed. 1899), p. 78.

It is a somewhat ironic circumstance that Mark Twain, one of the few to realize the true source of Howells' perfection as an artist, should be the chief of those who exalt him as a stylist. But if he was excessive in crediting his paragon with a Gallic reverence for *le mot juste*, he atoned nobly by himself capturing one of the inevitable words, in what is thus far the most felicitous characterization we have—*sustained*. In any of the memorable records of his wanderings, and in his novels and tales as well, it may be noted how remarkably Howells' prose displays this quality. This quality it is which reveals in him the sincere and exquisite prosateur, even as the absence of the same token betrays the mediocre versifier. "I intrench myself," says Mark, "behind that protecting word. There are others who exhibit those great qualities as greatly as does he, but only by intervalled distributions of rich moonlight, with stretches of veiled and dimmer landscape between; whereas Howells's moon sails cloudless skies all night and all the nights."

# VI

## HIS FICTION: TRANSCRIPTS OF LIFE

DESPITE Howells' prodigious versatility, literature became for him almost synonymous with fiction. In this his practice is consonant with his theory, which makes but little of literature in other than the narrative form and recognizes the novel as the type of types. Indeed, the production of novels was the serious business of his literary life. Such being the case, it may appear an anomalous circumstance in his development that he should have approached the supreme genre with hesitance and long delay. This circumstance in a development more precocious than retarded may even seem to support the hypothesis that has grown up about the suggestion of Robert Louis Stevenson, that Howells forced his talent in undertaking the realistic novel at all. The long apprenticeship and the timidity of handling observable in his early examples, however, far from indicating a natural inaptitude, are evidences of his sincerity in method.

It is frequently said that no author writes a sound novel before he is forty (Henry James made it thirty); and Howells is of that distinguished company whose sound instincts prevented them from writing any novels before hard upon the forties. *Their Wedding Journey* (1872)

scarcely pretended to be a novel; it was not until his third essay in the form, *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), written at the age of thirty-seven, that he attained novelistic stature in intent, that he completely overcame his unwillingness to leave the actual and embraced the *imaginatively* real. His enamorment of the actual and his reluctance to give wing to his imagination, while thus delaying the development of his novel, had the fortunate effect of bringing him to the form with the perfected style and the cultivated faculty of observation very necessary for success in his particular kind. Such a story as *Their Wedding Journey* would have failed dismally not only in the hands of an immature writer, but in those of any writer without his very special gifts and training. Henry James, who underwent no such training, found himself when scarcely younger, which makes it instructive to note that his development, unlike that of Howells, was from an immature handling of the imaginatively bold to an artistic treatment of the normal, while the older man, coming to the writing of fiction with his ideals and methods comparatively fixed, made a deliberate and cautious advance from the commonplace and clearly verifiable towards the abnormal and the more striking aspects of the normal.

Henry James, moreover, had not and never acquired a humanity capable of inspiring in him an affection for the commonplace. He and his father before him were exiles in their native land, precisely because it was crude and common. Howells and his father before him were firmly

rooted, making the crudeness and commonness gladly their portion because it was alive, human, and real. Howells felt the charm, the spell of the Old World, just as did James, but it never had the effect of making the New World in his eyes flat and profitless. Coming from the more primitive West, he found in what seemed to James the crudities of the East, particularly in the intellectual life of Boston and its environs, the gratification which James found in manorial England. Color and picturesqueness he found and continued to find in all places where men dwell, since color and picturesqueness are not conditioned by architecture and costume, however delightful these things may be, but by a state of mind and heart in the observer. His early environment was wholly fortunate, since it was supplemented by cosmopolitan experience, in reinforcing an inherited temperament which made for an estimate of modern life comparatively free from illusion. It helped make of him an interpreter of America, of American democracy, clear and exacting, if not like Whitman joyously cleaving the heavenward spaces. In this difference lies the final reason why Henry James could not have written *Their Wedding Journey.*

The story, if it can be called a story, shows how clearly the genesis of the Howells novel lies in the books of travel and those engaging miniatures of life at home collected under the title *Suburban Sketches* (1871). It is really a sketch on magnified dimensions, dimensions made possible by the fact that it is also a travel book. It is perfectly transitional, and therein lies its chief

interest. We could not wish Howells to have repeated its type with any frequency; for the advantage of the novel over the sketch and the short-story being the ampler canvas, there is small point in any writer's choosing the larger form and spurning the opportunity offered for the development of character. *Their Wedding Journey,* however, does have the merit of being so thoroughly consistent with itself that it would hardly occur to question its propriety were it not for the manner in which the author confides his own questioning. If there is any little lapse in taste to mar this pleasant work it is the author's miscalculation of the power of ironic cajolery. He begins by expressing a distrust of his fitness for "a sustained or involved narration,"[1] and on this account refrains from rehearsing the love story antecedent to the journey. Again, he queries: "Do I pitch the pipe too low? We poor honest men are at a sad disadvantage; and now and then I am minded to give a loose to fancy, and attribute something really grand and fine to my people, in order to make them worthier the reader's respected acquaintance."[2] Such implicit commendation of his wares, while seeming to bespeak immaturity, is by no means to be accounted an indiscretion of youth. Quite to the contrary, it is but a milder manifestation of a kind of *réclame* observable in his later and more pretentious work, which introduces romantic fiction as a corrupting influence upon his characters, as in *The Minister's Charge,* or even gives some of the characters a

[1] *Their Wedding Journey* (1899), p. 1.
[2] *Ibid.,* p. 239.

polemical cast, as when the insane hero of *The Shadow of a Dream* is made a rabid romanticist and idolater of Byron.

In the present instance, no manner of apology is called for, since the book could not deliver more exactly what it promises. It details the experiences of Basil and Isabel March, incognito, after the manner of bridal couples, on their honeymoon trip to Niagara, the St. Lawrence, Montreal, and Quebec. Clever in portraiture, rich in historical flavor, and in kaleidoscopic description, with a classic bit of scene-painting at Niagara, the work has its most remarkable quality in the air of adventure investing the thousand little incidents of travel. This, its life-essence, no reader can or need be argued into accepting. He should feel it a phenomenon—the roll of an express-train into the night; but if he does not, he will not be cajoled into doing so.

In the persons of the Marches, it is fair to assume, Howells has incarnated his idea of the normal male and female of our species. They appear again and again in his novels, advancing in years with their creator, receiving now and then a biographical touch, lovingly bestowed, but certainly sharing more in his irrepressible vitality than in his deepening wisdom. "But where," I hear the reader ask, "do you get a standard of normality?" In truth, the matter is sadly subjective. The Marches, however, do succeed in passing most of the convenient tests. For one thing, they affect us variously according to our moods, and thus represent pretty faithfully the dull average of humanity. At rare and idealistic

moments, our hearts surcharged with esteem for our fellow-men, we spurn them contemptuously as libels on our kind; and then in pessimistic mood, rebellious at the simian antics of God's creatures, we welcome them as at least a shade more wise than most. They are in general less constant in their effect, more complete and subtle, than the bookish characters we know, and always a trifle below the level we expect people with their advantages to attain.

The variety they most conspicuously attain as fictional creations is two-fold. In the first place, although they are static characters to whom life has very little to teach, they do grow old. The worldly wisdom that comes to every one as a consequence of living is nowhere more beautifully made evident than in the Marches as we meet them, unchanged but indescribably mellowed in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) and *Their Silver Wedding Journey* (1899). More striking, however, is their emotional susceptibility to the situation in which they happen to be placed; their thought is tinctured by the mood of the dramatic moment; they are true spectators. This is wholly fortunate when it is artistically desirable to reinforce the atmosphere of a scene by its reaction upon sympathetic natures, but not so fortunate when foils are desired to throw its elements into relief. This might pass unnoted had not Howells on occasion used his Marches for the latter purpose so perfectly, as in *A Pair of Patient Lovers* (1901), where they play their parts with a detachment suggestive of Ben Jonson's comedy of humors. They maintain a sympathy with the prin-

cipal characters, who are quite abnormal, unknown to the norms of Jonsonian comedy, but at the same time intensify and clarify the effect of the action. A dismal contrast is the Hawthornesque tale, *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890), so fatally deficient in chiaroscuro, where our dear friends become positively morbid, as direly shadowed by the dream as any of the miserable company.

To depict the effect upon the Marches of advancing age is the motive for the additional chapter added to editions of *Their Wedding Journey* subsequent to 1887, "Niagara Revisited, Twelve Years After Their Wedding Journey." Life has not used them ill; neither have they enjoyed too much prosperity. The parents of two children, they have in fact come to the practice of certain mean economies. Marriage for Isabel has not realized "the poetic dream of a perfect union that a girl imagines it. . . . It was a state of trial, of probation; it was an ordeal, not an ecstasy."[3] Less depressing is *Their Silver Wedding Journey* (1899), the longest chronicle devoted exclusively to the Marches, where the theme of disillusionment is more lightly handled.

Basil, now the editor of *Every Other Week,* the rise of which journal furnishes the title *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), takes a Sabbatical year on leave, which, counting time, is neither a Sabbatical year nor a silver wedding journey. With much ado, he persuades his eager consort, confirmed in the feminine wiles of contrariness, that they should renew the memories of their courtship

[3] *Their Wedding Journey* (1899), p. 317.

abroad. The result is a complete travel book, augmented in volume and turned into novelistic form by the addition of a flirtatious love story, true to the Howells type, in which Mrs. March is given ample opportunity to practice her art as match-maker. Her skill in this art, hinted in *Their Wedding Journey* and exhaustively exhibited in subsequent volumes, we are led to believe, is, like her contrariety and illogicality, a natural endowment of woman, more or less incomprehensible to man. Howells' incessant playing upon these three motives, together with the less gracious one of hysterics, has outraged many critics, who are not at all assuaged by the perception that the Howells men betray complementary though different intellectual deficiencies. I believe that it is the men rather than the women themselves who refuse to accept the Howells portrayals; and I believe that it is no longer necessary to say much on this topic, for despite the rather frequent explosions of indignation it has become pretty well established as a canon of Howells criticism that he displays a very remarkable insight into the feminine heart. It ought to be said, however, that the three major motives indicated do not merely represent superficial annoyances. The illogicality of the Howells woman in general and of Mrs. March in particular, for example, enables her to compass a pure idealism that sometimes mystifies and sometimes inspires the men under her influence and not infrequently works out in pure goodness and kindness. Kindness and goodness, of course, should not be allowed to happen in that way; but that is the way in which they do

very often happen. Every day we are called upon to admire benefactors who are in no sense models of mentality and who have probably proceeded on entirely wrong assumptions, and even to love them. So to accept a Howells heroine is not, as one incensed critic puts it, "to believe the future of our country hopeless." It is perhaps to believe that the progress of our country, or the happiness of any one of us, will not be along the beautiful lines of logic. Howells' own acceptance of his women is based very little on gallantry and still less on illusion; it goes with his ready acceptance of all reality, and his disposition, somewhat vociferously discovered by the above-mentioned critic, to "throw the responsibility on the Almighty." In *Their Silver Wedding Journey,* a finished and unobtrusive handling of his favorite motives, added to a nicely balanced wielding of the theme of age versus youth, which he exhausted in *Indian Summer* (1886), enlivens the sojourning and sight-seeing in Hamburg, Leipsic, Carlsbad, Weimar, and Berlin. Finally, Mrs. March decides they shall not go home. Then we are sure they are on their way.

The Marches share with many others of Howells' people their pleasing habit of walking in and out of his scene. Although he has never chosen to follow in the scientific fashion of Thackeray or Zola the fortunes of any single family, and has written but one *bona fide* sequel, the utopian romance, *Through the Eye of the Needle,* he is properly loath to relinquish the personages of his creation, right realistically permitting his reader to renew their acquaintance, or to catch unexpected

glimpses of them here and there. This practice imparts a convincing unity to his *comédie humaine.* Our casual meeting with Mr. Percy Bysshe Shelley Ray, the promising young novelist of *The World of Chance,* after five years, in *The Story of a Play,* is managed in a way to leave a brisk sense of the touch and go of actual affairs. The presence of the Hilarys in the latter book is an instance of the more thoroughgoing treatment which does illumine the history of a family. Ordinarily, however, there is no profound purpose in the resumption, but a gratification of our sense of familiarity with his world. Such is the effect when we take up the second novel, *A Chance Acquaintance* (1873), of our having caught a glimpse of its charming heroine, Kitty Ellison, in *Their Wedding Journey.*

While the travel interest gets the better of the first story, the imaginative eclipses the actual in the second, which is descriptive of travel through the same region. To this work he brings a maturity in the development of theme and a deftness in the handling of plot, slight as the plot is, comparable to the finish of style and the keenness of observation noted in the earlier book. More remarkable even than the fact of his attaining these qualities at a bound, is the evidence afforded of their utter nativeness to him. The dominant themes are not only heavily foreshadowed in *Their Wedding Journey* but are prophetic of his future writings. His concern with the affairs of the heart, his general treatment of the love theme, as well as his tricks of illuminating the feminine mind and contrasting the sexes, his preoccupation

with the question of social distinctions, and, above all, his sturdy nationalism, were to be with him always very much as they were with him in *A Chance Acquaintance.* Primarily, however, the volume is a study of American aristocracy, the caste spirit in conflict with the leveling force of love. It is the American *Pride and Prejudice.*

The story is set in motion by an exceedingly commonplace and lifelike accident of travel. Miss Kitty inadvertently takes the arm of Mr. Miles Arbuton, the aristocratic protagonist; and the embarrassing episode which ensues is made very naturally to prepare the way to a delightful steamboat acquaintanceship. This acquaintanceship is brought to the stage of love with an expedition scarcely paralleled except in the romantic comedy *Out of the Question,* for Howells' heroes and heroines have remarkable difficulties in deciding whether or not they are in love—his protest against the romantic doctrine of love at first sight. A climax of the most noiseless and perfect nature finally separates the ill-mated pair, after the incompatibility of such a sweet, sincere, and democratic soul as Kitty Ellison with such a monster of inane insolence and condescension as Mr. Arbuton has been demonstrated from a thousand angles, so that the ending, incidentally a protest against the romantic doctrine that love levels all barriers, is inevitable, just as the ending of *Pride and Prejudice,* which does not erect impassable barriers, is inevitable.

If *A Chance Acquaintance* fail to transmit the full artistic satisfaction of *Pride and Prejudice,* it is because the problem transferred to American

soil and adapted to American conditions, offers difficulties that the Divine Jane did not have to reckon with. American aristocracy is at best a very unlovely manifestation—spasmodic, refractory, and implastic to the artist's hand, no true aristocracy at all to the purpose of Henry James. And in Mr. Miles Arbuton, Howells, as if on a wager, furnished himself with a subject as vacuous as one could possibly find. Beside him, Basil March is a hero of romance. An idiot is picturesque and usually appealing, but an educated, travelled, well-dressed man with no vestige of intelligence is a challenge to the subtlest art. The aggressive egoism of Silas Lapham and Sir Willoughby Patterne has an inherent fascination of which the utterly passive egoism of Miles Arbuton is quite devoid. Consequently, Howells not only set himself a difficult task but weakened at the outstart what is one of the strongest features of *Pride and Prejudice*—the love motivation. The conclusion of *A Chance Acquaintance* is inevitable, but the beginning of Jane Austen's novel is compulsory. Howells is of course prevented by the nature of his problem from crediting his hero with the blameless manners admired by the ladies, the import of the action being that this blameless person, in the sense that he would die rather than in any way violate the conventions, is from the simply human point of view boorish and cruel. He does, however, try for a *point d'appui* by leaving us to believe with the ladies that his creation is very handsome and that, although he is too well-bred for humor, there is a certain aptness in his wit. The latter is somewhat difficult for any one

who enjoys humor to see, and the illustrator, evidently brushed by the mantle of George Cruikshank, has done for the former. Mr. Arbuton touches humanity for one frenzied moment, in which he so far loses his dignity as to throw a pebble against the cliff at Cape Eternity, a moment in which "he feared himself capable of shaking hands with the shabby Englishman in the Glengarry cap, or of asking the whole admiring company of passengers down to the bar."

It ought also to be remembered that *Pride and Prejudice* is variously great and altogether of a high excellence below which it is not a defect so much as an inevitability to fall. Howells in his manner of telling his story makes technical feats of some things that go for granted in Jane Austen's, and this is to lose something of brightness and charm. The matter of the author's attitude toward his characters, so far as it affects these two stories, is not structural but pervasive, determining the color and tone of the whole. Each attains impartiality and formal objectivity of manner, but the English work, for all that it lashes the presumptions and condescensions of aristocracy, is saturate with sunshine. Its shade is the mottled glory of ancestral parks. Its author, though she clearly speaks through the lips of Elizabeth Bennet in that immortal scene which depicts the taking down of Lady Catharine de Burgh, is nevertheless completely detached, as wholly superior to Elizabeth as to the irate lady. Howells, for all the wholesome fun he makes, does not quite achieve that superb and unconscious

aloofness which insures his way of telling the story against tincture from the emotions of his characters. It is not so much that we feel his sympathetic preoccupation with the perplexities of his people as that we detect self-consciousness in the elaborate attentions he bestows upon them. The danger of all "psychologizing" in fiction (Howells does not offend here as he does in such a later novel as *Fennel and Rue*) lies in muddling the color, not in disturbing the structure or altering the real import of the work. Trifles light as air become clothed in the trimmings of tragedy, so that the most ordinary situation takes the cast of "inexorable fate," or "sinister chance," and dawns upon the participants with "paralyzing clearness." Readers of *Heroines of Fiction* may recall Howells' high admiration for Jane Austen's skill in the utilization of trivial events, especially his just and amusing appreciation of the lifelike quality in Anne Eliot's rescue from the teasing clutches of two-year-old Walter in *Persuasion;* and his own rescues usually have the true Austenian ring. In *A Chance Acquaintance* it is true that he employs a more formidable device than a naughty little boy—a dog; but again the slight difference in tone is due to the fact that he forces the note. His trivialities are insisted upon, whereas Jane Austen never for a moment conveys the impression that hers are anything more than the trivialities they are. She continues to reap the reward of a superbly unconscious superiority to her material; while Howells is frequently caught exhibiting his, with an air of say-

ing, "Behold, how delightfully insignificant!" much as a romancer might exclaim, "Behold, how sublime!"

The romantic comedy *Out of the Question* (1877) deals with the same problem of American aristocracy, but after the fashion of stageland. In the interests of theatric effect, the conditions are reversed, the hero, Blake, being a poor but immaculate steamboat engineer, very importunate in the service of the aristocratic Mrs. Bellingham and her daughter Leslie, having been started in that direction by the exactions of Aunt Kate. The scene plays at the Ponkwasset Hotel, a country hostelry familiar to Howells' readers. In the adjacent woods, our hero rescues Miss Leslie from a couple of brigands, and, not content with that, pursues the ruffians and rends from them their booty, receiving in the encounter a broken wrist. His modesty, on all occasions nauseous, is quite ludicrous when, torn and bleeding, he pretends to have found the watch quite by accident. The zeal of his creator, however, comes very near spoiling him as a stage hero, through an excessive exposition of his sublime qualities. His spiritual graces no doubt require testimony from the other characters, but it is bad dramatic technique to have them forever commenting on his handsome face and superb figure. No actor is to be envied who has an entrance cued in this manner: "Hello! That's Blake's voice now. . . . I don't wonder it takes Leslie. It's the most sympathetic voice in the world." [4]

But that Blake's goodness and greatness should

[4] *Out of the Question* (1877), p. 153.

avail to win the hand of the fair Leslie is "out of the question." Having once been a steamboat engineer, he can never be a "gentleman." Accordingly, Mr. Charles Bellingham, Leslie's brother, is summoned to give him his *congé* in a merciful manner. The superstructure of moving accident is about to be completed by the discovery that Blake is known to Mr. Charles of old, is revered by him as a paragon of manly virtue, and is bound and endeared to him as his savior from a watery death in the Mississippi, when suddenly the character of the play changes from romantic comedy to farce. With the swiftness of magic, the questions raised by the first part are dropped, and the subject is now the diplomacy of Mr. Charles Bellingham, the manner adopted being that of the one-act farces. For this reason *Out of the Question* is hardly to be regarded as a complement to *A Chance Acquaintance.*

*A Counterfeit Presentment* (1877) was the second and last of Howells' flirtations with melodrama. It enjoyed presentation with Lawrence Barrett in the leading rôle; and, parenthetically, it may interest theatre-goers of this generation to know that the version of *Yorick's Love* in which Barrett often appeared was made for him by Howells from *Un Drama Nuevo* by Estebanez. Happily thereafter Howells gratified his instinct for play-writing in the creation of his inimitable farces, although an excellent specimen, *The Parlor Car* (1876), had preceded the comedies. These farces he turned out mostly for the use of Messrs. Harper at Christmas time, to appear later in the "Black and White Series," and finally to be col-

lected in books as delightful as any from his pen. *Evening Dress* (1893) was reprinted from the *Cosmopolitan,* being, together with the romance, *A Traveler from Altruria,* and the story, *A Parting and a Meeting,* the souvenir of its author's brief editorial connection with that journal. In 1900, four came from the Riverside Press at Cambridge, namely, *Room Forty-Five, Bride Roses: a Scene, The Smoking Car,* and *An Indian Giver: a Comedy.* The others are included in the following list: *The Sleeping Car* (1883), *The Register* (1884), *The Elevator* (1885), *The Garroters* (1886), *A Sea-Change; or Love's Stowaway: a Lyricated Farce* (1888, Ticknor), the collections—*The Mouse-Trap and Other Farces* (1889) and *The Sleeping Car and Other Farces* (1890), *The Albany Depot* (1892), *A Letter of Introduction* (1892), *The Unexpected Guests* (1893), *A Likely Story* (1894), *Five O'Clock Tea* (1894), *A Previous Engagement: Comedy* (1897), and *Parting Friends* (1911). The presence of two of the best among the later ones lends the miscellany, *The Daughter of the Storage,* its chief distinction.

In some of these little farces Howells has given us his most perfect work; they are like the sketches of travel in realizing completely the possibilities of a secondary genre. That they have appealed mostly to amateur actors is altogether due to their genre, for they are anything but amateurish in execution. They are parlor plays *par excellence,* and have been played privately everywhere, even the advance sheets, according to the testimony of Henry Mills Alden, being in request

before publication.[5] In England they have enjoyed a somewhat more public favor, *The Mouse Trap* having been twice played in London with an all-star cast which included Ellen Terry and Mrs. Kendall. Another one aroused the enthusiasm of no more lenient a critic than Mr. Bernard Shaw, who recorded in his *Dramatic Opinions:* "The little piece showed, as might have been expected, that with three weeks' practice the American novelist could write the heads off the poor bunglers to whom our managers generally appeal when they want a small bit of work to amuse the people who come at eight." [6]

One reason for Howells' success with the form may be that the farces represent him in a fairly complete though evanescent state of liberation from his Anglo-Saxon heritage. They form, in fact, his most intimate attachment to the French. There are few things more interesting to observe in his work than the disappearance of the sentimentality of the long comedies when the subtle psychologist goes out to play, unburdened of the necessity of making a drama, and content to treat manners in their amusing aspects with unlimited indulgence. Mr. Pattee in his chapter on Howells has attractively and in some detail drawn a comparison with Richardson which, in considering the farces, might very well be made with Richardson's great French contemporary, Marivaux, instead. While in Howells we have no more the complicate intrigue of *Le Jeu de l'Amour et du*

[5] J. Henry Harper, *The House of Harper* (1912), p. 320.
[6] *Dramatic Opinions,* I, 265.

*Hasard* than the moral sentiment of *Clarissa Harlowe,* we do have a closer alliance with the spirit of the French analyst. The delicate psychology of the feminine heart, especially in its vain and ineffectual effort to mask itself with words, and with its pride in the suppression of feelings that will not down, is handled with an infinitude of nuance. The motives are often if not prevailingly satiric, but no deep notes are struck. Lovers quarrel incessantly, their mutual esteem in no jeopardy. No passion enters the conflict, only moods and whims. Essentially social and humane, these pieces leave the larger humanity behind for a space, shut without drawing-room doors; and with the restricted aim and lightened mood, their author has his most signal success in his ever-obvious desire to make feminine absurdity charming. Their clearest analogue may be found in the *Proverbes* of Alfred de Musset, the most gifted nineteenth-century exponent of *marivaudage.* Ours are simpler and more fully blooded in theme and structure, but quite as rarefied in psychology. Again, they are more realistic, preserving the world of Boston, never attaining the almost Arcadian, Watteau-like, summer-garden atmosphere, much less the moonlight fantasy which so often etherealizes the theatre of De Musset; but the two are very like in preferring badinage to wit, and bird-like chatter to conversation.

These little plays vary in merit, from comparatively bald studies in hysteria, like *The Mouse Trap,* based on the feminine fear of small rodents, a theme none too novel but seemingly of perennial

appeal, to pieces of orient ivory like *The Garroters.* Some very few, like *Five O'Clock Tea,* have no complication, merely events. Some do not scorn the moving accident, *A Likely Story* deriving its mildly ironic title from the fact that complication and resolution rest upon an extremely improbable double accident; but in general a truly farcical complication is created entirely from character. In the majority of cases we encounter nothing external, merely ludicrous self-deception; there is no mouse in *The Mouse Trap,* much less a footpad in *The Garroters.* The latter piece is, in fact, an extreme example of solicitude in reducing a supposed basis in coincidence to pure misunderstanding.

The characters are all of the same social set and the *dramatis personæ* fairly constant. Mr. and Mrs. Willis Campbell are omnipresent, the sublimated counterparts of Mr. and Mrs. Basil March. Mrs. Campbell is chief exponent of illogicality and contrariety, while her sister-in-law, Mrs. Roberts, specializes in exaggeration. Mr. Campbell, tease and trickster, usually sensible and witty, enjoying hugely the predicaments of others, except when, as in *A Likely Story,* he is forced to be one of the dupes himself, ordinarily plays the norm. Mr. Edward Roberts, his brother-in-law, very absent-minded, candid, honest, and utterly unresourceful, makes a good gull. He habitually serves as a butt for the teasing of Mr. Willis, and is exhibited best perhaps in *A Letter of Introduction* and *The Albany Depot.* In general, the men of this elect circle are hardly more resourceful than the women, though less noisy. They are

quite as helpless in *The Elevator,* when the arriving guests at Mrs. Roberts' apartments in the Hotel Bellingham get caught between floors, whereupon there is much ado, until the arrival of Mr. Willis Campbell, who suggests that since the elevator will not go up they start it down and walk up.

The long "lyricated" farce, *A Sea-Change; or Love's Stowaway,* is unique among Howells' plays, a sustained extravaganza somewhat in the style of the Gilbert-Sullivan operettas. It is burlesque in tone rather than farcical, and never violates its tone, making one of his merriest efforts to woo the laughing muse. The verse is quite Gilbertian, and the best in rhythmic quality that he ever did. The *vers libre* of the recitatives betrays a facility in the handling of free meters never to be suspected from his more pretentious poetry.

Howells took the drama with less seriousness than any other form. In their artistic seriousness, however, the farces are at one with the novels; and the fact that the latter abound in protracted comic situations or pathetic situations that can be turned over with their comic side uppermost, makes the similarity appear greater than it really is. Turning back to his third novel, *A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), we shall see that he could very successfully employ the ordinary materials of pathos, but in his fifth, *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879), he returned to the style and problem of *A Chance Acquaintance* in lighter mood than ever.

*A Foregone Conclusion* is the first novelistic fruit of his Venetian consulate, and represents

him in his initial attempt fully to realize the form, to touch deep springs of character, to give certain direction to dramatic forces, and to build as the architect builds. The result is a structure less like those Spanish tales of the picaresque which he was fond of holding up as models than he was again to attain for many years. To this end the descriptive element is subordinated and finely integrated, fulfilling only its noblest function of fixing and enriching the human scene. Except in a few passages, where he looses his hand, notably a lavish picture of Casa Vervain, the residence of his heroine, and a gorgeously colored description of a Corpus Christi procession, his purpose has been by discreet touches to give the sense of Venice by sunlight or candle-light. "Little miracles of observation," he has somewhere called them, which lend a salient touch of odor, sound, or color—the creak of an oar, or the breathing of the gondoliers. In clear characterization and artistic plotting it is the first of his books to suggest Turgeniev. This it does not merely in method, but to a certain degree in substance. Don Ippolito, for example, who as a matter of fact was drawn from life, his original being the priest with whom Howells read Dante, seems to have taken over something from the type of idealist who, with his fertile brain, and his vague but irrepressible longings, unpacks his heart with words through so many Russian novels. Although marred by a prolonged and tawdry ending, *A Foregone Conclusion* is altogether a more profound and moving book, as well as a more shapely, than either of the antecedent ones.

Don Ippolito, strange, pathetic, and sinister figure of a priest fallen from the arms of the Church in that place and that day when a priest found his only refuge, his only consolation in the Church, defies characterization in a word. Ferris, the United States consul, calls him a universal genius, another Da Vinci, yet is ever appalled by his childlike ignorance of the world. The pathos lies in his ignorance of the fact that the double life under which he chafes bars him effectively from what he most needs—love and sympathy. Ferris, from whom we learn most of what we know about him, surmises this but hardly realizes it. Don Ippolito longs for America, the inventor's Utopia, as artists long for Italy, and the circumstance of Civil War in America gives him an opportunity to approach Ferris with an ingenious model of cannon for use by the Union army. The acquaintanceship leads to his engagement by an American lady, Mrs. Vervain, as Italian teacher to her daughter, Florida, Mrs. Vervain being led to believe that she has thus put an end to the annoyance suffered in the past of having tutors turn lovers. All things conspire to make the dawn of love in the poor priest's heart inevitable, if ever love dawned inevitably. Howells seldom handled a more complex situation, or one more serious for the persons involved, or one depending so little upon the conventions. The inexorably delicate predicament of Ferris in finding himself in love after being bound by Don Ippolito's confidence, is, on the other hand, the typical situation for Howells lovers, being brought about by his own obtuseness and prolonged by his unresourceful-

ness. The author's success with the tragedy of the priest is the more remarkable in that he consistently subordinates him to the hero, and prefers to view him through the eyes of the other parties to the complication. This does not seem to spoil Don Ippolito, although it does contribute to the mystery that shrouds him to the end. Like Florida, he has his *dossier,* while Ferris is more or less an improvisation.

Florida is a made character, but beautifully and strongly made. She is studied by the method of contradictory traits. A certain hauteur, not to say arrogance, of her nature, for example, drives her to an excessive humility in her devotion to her mother, and later, we are told, to her children. Her fiery temper, a bequest, along with her tropical name, from her father, the late Colonel Vervain, seeks compensation in effusive remorse. She is strikingly contrasted with her mother, who is of the fragile, frank, and impulsive type, but who has, nevertheless, a charm which on two or three occasions frustrates her author in a seeming desire to hold her up to ridicule. Florida's intense reserve is a chill wall against the brusqueries of Ferris, especially when directed against her mother. She is a ritualist in religion, but almost fierce in her scorn of hypocrisy and in her devotion to truth, which triples the barrier in the way of her understanding the priestly lover. The reaction of these two disparate and complex natures upon each other is the arresting feature of the novel. Unwittingly she touches the most dangerous chords, bringing him finally to the declaration that overwhelms her with horror. It is impossi-

ble that she should not bruise him cruelly, but a flood of comprehension and remorse compels her at the parting moment to fling her arms about his neck in a pitying embrace.

*A Foregone Conclusion,* although different from most of Howells' novels, more Continental in theme and handling, is true to type in its elaborate faithfulness to a background and to characters thoroughly known to him. The life of Ferris, while not autobiographical, reflects perfectly the spirit of the life he must have led as Consul to Venice, with an air almost of self-consciousness in the change of avocation from literature to painting. In his next novel, *Private Theatricals,* which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* from November, 1875, to May, 1876, he seems to have overstepped the bounds of propriety in this regard, for the book, which appeared in Edinburgh, was suppressed. Mr. Pattee guessed the reason, and a writer for the *Bookman,* who signs himself "Ricus," claims to have first-hand information that the inhabitants of the little mountain resort where the scene is laid, furious at the portraits of themselves which they found between the covers of the *Atlantic,* threatened Howells with the law.[7] Parenthetically, it may interest bibliophiles to know that the suppression of *Niagara Revisited* (1884) was for a different reason, although the same might be surmised. The truth is, however, that that pamphlet was in its original form written and printed as railroad advertising matter, and the difficulties which led to the de-

[7] "A Suppressed Novel of Mr. Howells" in the *Bookman* (1910), 32:201.

struction of the edition were pecuniary. *Private Theatricals* has posthumously (1921) been added to the list of Howells' works as *Mrs. Farrell,* and happily so, containing as it does his only full length portrait of a true flirt. Its problem is the delicate one of the misery left in the trail of a heartless coquette, and it is premonitory of the reversion from the style of *A Foregone Conclusion* to the earlier manner of *A Chance Acquaintance*—a reversion brought fully to pass in *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879). It is still true in a sense that *A Foregone Conclusion* inaugurates a second period in his work, just as there is a certain justification for dating a third from *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), but these "periods" are very scornful of chronology, and *The Lady of the Aroostook,* except that it is an "international" novel and makes audible the "conscience" motif, carries on the spirit and tradition of *Their Wedding Journey* and *A Chance Acquaintance.* Like the latter, it is aimed directly at Boston.

*The Lady of the Aroostook* seems to me to enjoy a reputation somewhat beyond its deserving. It is pronounced by Harry Thurston Peck "the most perfect story that American literature has yet produced,"[8] and is constantly cited in private conversation as the most characteristic of all Howells' productions. It is a story whose peculiar charm makes even the slightest detraction appear mean and ungrateful, but this is surely to make it shine at the expense of many of Howells' nobler works. Its heroine, Lydia Blood, is a

[8] *The Personal Equation* (1898), p. 26.

New England edition of Kitty Ellison, rather than "a second Marcia Hubbard, but with finer traits," as Harry Thurston Peck has it, displaying among other local attributes the New England conscience, a malady destined direly to afflict some of Howells' later creations. Her function is identical with Kitty's, to represent the true gentility of democracy as opposed to the snobbery of a superficially Europeanized society. The sharpest shot is delivered in having her originality and her fine instincts appreciated in a society with more conventions than it could possibly know what to do with. This is typical of Howells' handling of the so-called international situation, which differs from that of Henry James in conceiving the situation in its dramatic rather than in its critical aspect. That is to say, he is concerned with mutual reactions; and so far from seeing in the conventions of a stable social organization something sacred, fixed, and immutable, he is impressed by the fact that Europeans themselves do not regard them so. And if some of his heroines do redound rather too much to the credit of America, they are at least as true as Daisy Miller.

He here seeks to have Lydia Blood prove herself a "lady" in a situation so unladylike as to harrow up the souls of Anglicized Bostonians. Accordingly, he gets her, after it has been arranged that she shall be sent to her aunt in Venice, aboard the freighter *Aroostook,* where it is discovered that she is the only woman on board, and is making the voyage with three men passengers, not to speak of the crew. It must be confessed that the situation is shorn somewhat of its horror by the

previous introduction of Lydia's protector, the fatherly Captain Jenness, an incarnation of bluff courtesy, kindness, and loyalty, who has an old sea-dog's habit of saying grace at meals; but if we are to judge by the conduct of the two "gentlemen," Mr. Staniford and Mr. Dunham, the thing is passing bold. These exquisites are many days out before they recover from the shock. They give the matter a most exhaustive analysis, debating ways and means of keeping their fair fellow-passenger unconscious of the anomaly of her position, no very difficult matter it seems, and utterly unable to do the one possible thing—accept the situation.

The story falls into three parts, geographical as well as structural: the New England village of Lydia's origin, which is inimitably done; the voyage, which will at length become dull to those of limited liking for the conversation in gramaphonic record of Messrs. Staniford and Dunham; and the international events at Trieste and Venice, which ought briskly to refresh the weary. Messrs. Staniford and Dunham indeed outshine all others of the Howells "gentlemen" in their capacity for protracted and cattish gossip. Their effeminate interest in Lydia's gowns and their perturbation over the mild provincialism of her speech are endless. The book ought always to live by virtue of its truly monumental study of South Bradfield, to which there is a happy reversion at the end. We are given not merely a wealth of factual detail concerning existence among the New England villagers—their habits of thought, their peculiar intonations in speech, and minutiæ such as their

preference of Japan to China tea—but pictorial embodiments that defy obliteration. The parlor lamp of pea-green glass and red woollen wick that sheds its radiance from Miss Maria's centre-table has a value that is unforgettable. The wisest words uttered by Harry Thurston Peck, the most enthusiastic commentator on this novel, are his cry of wonder and delight at that lamp, which "alone is sufficient claim to immortality, for its glow, somehow or other, makes the whole life and aspect of South Bradfield perceptible at a glance."[9]

Howells' intolerance in his criticism of anything remotely resembling traditional machinery in the conduct of a story, justifies one, I think, in being rigorously critical of his own work in this regard. He has even cast a reflection upon the impeccable Jane, apropos of Louisa Musgrove's jumping from the sea-wall at Lyme Regis in *Persuasion*. So I am emboldened to say that I find the devices of *The Lady of the Aroostook* rather "obvious," in particular, the rescue of Hicks. Howells has elsewhere in his novels as well as in his criticism been at great pains to demonstrate the futility of trying to redeem a hero by making him take part in a rescue or other heroic exploit. That can be done only by making the nobility inherent in his character. Yet the knights-errant of Sir Walter, imbued as they are with the ideals of a vanished chivalry, do not commonly participate in adventurous episodes more unconvincing than that in which he seeks to redeem Staniford. The letter device, also, could easily be strengthened if not

[9] *The Personal Equation* (1898), p. 28.

removed from the category of accident, say by having the porter steal it for the stamps, after a manner far from rare among the race of hotel porters. Howells was either uncommonly fortunate or uncommonly wise in that his Italian experience did not dictate such an enhancement to the realism of his study. Then there is the heart-easing chapter descriptive of the wedding, which appears to be a conventional falling-off from the high courage displayed in *A Chance Acquaintance;* but it must be conceded that Staniford is by no means so impossible a match as Mr. Arbuton. The *Aroostook* is conveniently laid up for repairs in order that Captain Jenness may attend the ceremony, and that his cheery prophecy of happiness may fortify the reader against the speculations of more discerning friends.

*The Undiscovered Country* (1880), reminiscent of *The Blithedale Romance,* in which Howells under the influence of Hawthorne falls into a mild and pretty strain of symbolism of a kind that he is wont studiously to avoid, brings to mind his curious critical judgment expressing no uncertain preference for that one among all Hawthorne's novels. I am not sure that when he came to write *Heroines of Fiction* it lay at all heavily upon his mind to justify that odd preference; but I do feel that the reader of those *causeries* must agree with me that they unwittingly exhibit the greatness of *The Scarlet Letter.* His exaggerated antipathy to symbolism explains his coldness toward *The Marble Faun;* and it is not difficult to understand why he should like least of all *The House of the Seven Gables,* hovering as it does between heaven and

earth. Yet his dismissal of the latter book one might not be prepared for, since, not to mention the fact that Hawthorne has scarcely equalled its minute photography elsewhere, the symbolism is more firmly integrated than in *The Marble Faun;* that is, there is little so completely externalized as the faun's ears and Hilda's doves. But perhaps that is the very reason: the symbolism of *The House of the Seven Gables* simply cannot be evaded.

There are fancies in Howells' earlier books, it is true, which indicate a capacity for such indulgence as we find here. There is, for example, a rose in *A Chance Acquaintance* which one expects momently to become a symbolic rose; and on the gray morning that closes Kitty's love drama the heavens are made to weep a fine autumnal rain in the garden of the Ursalines. More striking than anything elsewhere to be found, however, is the symbolic value which the dullest reader must attach to the inventions of the Venetian priest, Don Ippolito, in *A Foregone Conclusion,* foreshadowing as they do the final strife after the impossible which is to bring his tragic life to its close. The episode of his repairing the fountain may even be said to have no other than a symbolic value.

In the present story, the spiritualist, Dr. Boynton, and his daughter, Egeria, have found refuge in a community of Shakers. Egeria, her nerves shattered by her experiences as her father's medium, succumbs to the rigors of the journey, a journey made very rigorous indeed by her father's utter helplessness in the world of railroads, and falls ill with a fever. Old Boynton, who has

dedicated his child to the study of truth, and explains, "I have seen her change from a creature of robust, terrestrial tendencies to a being of moods almost as ethereal as those of the spirits with which it has been my struggle to associate her," awaits her return to health, eager to resume experiments in his present favorable surroundings, free from the atmosphere of mercenary, professional mediumism. But as spring advances his hitherto faithful subject takes an earthy joy in the rich vitality of the season. The full tide of youth, so long repressed by her sense of duty to her father, comes surging back, and carries her beyond his influence. The exquisite complement to the episode is the autumnal decline of the old man, who never recovers from the blow. " 'You see,' he said, 'how they have tricked out my room for me?' and he indicated the boughs of colored leaves, varied with bunches of wild asters and tops of golden-rod, in which the Shakers had carried him the autumn. 'There isn't any healing in my leaves, as there was in the flowers which they brought Egeria this spring,' he added, with a slight sigh, 'but there is sympathy—sympathy.' "[10]

This book has three important bearings upon its author's development as a novelist: it constitutes his first extended study in religious sectarianism, a subject of great interest to him; it inaugurates his delvings into the occult; and it represents the apotheosis of the Howells love story. Ford, the lover of Egeria, creates his story out of his own sheer stupidity, making a rival of the in-

[10] *The Undiscovered Country* (1908), p. 316.

nocent Hatch, who is guilty of nothing worse than a more effectual kindness to the Boyntons than his, a most unconvincing hallucination that persists until the actual engagement of Hatch to another is announced. While the most excessive thing of its kind that Howells has given us, it is readily forgiven on account of the finishing touch which it lends to the figure of Sister Frances.

In Sister Frances, the most exquisite vignette that ever adorned a novel, Howells has managed to say more beautifully and with finer articulation than he has elsewhere said it, all that any one could say from the standpoint of simple and every-day humanity, upon the subject of celibacy in religious sects and orders. And by inheritance and by virtue of early training in tolerance of eccentric sectarianism and sympathy with it, he is eminently qualified to pass judgment upon it. In *The Day of Their Wedding* (1896), he has given the comedy of the matter, in a lively chronicle of the adventures of Althea Brown and Lorenzo Weaver, who attempt to give up the "angelic life" for the earthly order.

The volume in hand records his first skirmishing on the frontier of the undiscovered country, a frontier which, needless to say, remains unpenetrated in the novel of realism. Howells' enthusiasm was enlisted rather by the psychological problems involved; his interest lay in the effects induced in the minds of investigators of supernormal phenomena, not so much in the phenomena themselves. This being the case, it is not strictly true to say that as the years rolled on he became more and more skeptical with regard to them.

What clearly happened was that he studied their reaction upon more and more sophisticated observers. The personnel of *The Undiscovered Country* is worlds apart from the intellectually veneered circle of *Between the Dark and the Daylight.* No greater disparity can be imagined than that between the boundless faith of the visionary whose portrait is drawn at full length in *The Undiscovered Country,* and the chill worldliness of the little club of skeptics whose proceedings are sketched in the short stories. This fact invites a suspension of judgment on the question of Howells' personal beliefs; but it does give a unique value to Dr. Boynton among this class of his characters.

Dr. Boynton is a country physician who has lost friends and practice in his blind and passionate devotion to the occult. Sympathy, the sympathy of understanding, is the motive for his portrayal; his creator abstains cautiously from idealizing him. No attempt is made to repress the ironic humor or to gloss the unlovely aspects which must of necessity manifest themselves when a mortal makes the hope of immortality the sole concern of his earthly existence. He becomes capable of reproaching himself for having in attending an injured child neglected the larger duty to the race. A clever stroke is that which makes him take the hat of a gentleman who is in *séance* for the recovery of lost property. He is sublimely impatient of all opposition to his theories, indulging in outbursts of flamboyant rhetoric, swiftly to be succeeded by moods of childlike repentance and reconciliation, as soon as a new theory is evolved in

his poor busy brain. His is not withal a simple type of visionary; he is actually endowed not only with the race conscience but with a certain scientific attitude of mind, however amusing his claims to its possession may sound; and there is a pathetic inevitability in his construction of a new hypothesis out of the débris of his former theories —that spiritualism is not spiritualism at all, but "a grosser materialism than that which denies; a materialism that asserts and affirms, and appeals for proof to purely physical phenomena."[11] Finally, it is a true psychology that shows the vigor of his speculative power triumphant over the ruin of his life's hope, and permits him to die in "an enthusiasm for death."

This striking and pathetic figure, Howells' second venture with a bold and unusual type, exalts his study, making it in the fullest sense a document in human character, not a mere exposé. It has, however, the latter nature as well: by way of glaring contrast to the presence of Dr. Boynton and Egeria, and in order to reinforce the idyllic value of the life depicted among the Shakers, it opens sordidly enough, plunging us at once into the depths of mediumistic Boston, the Boston of Henry James' *Bostonians*. In this portion of the story we scent the note-book a trifle more decidedly than in the depictions of Shaker life, but the re-creation is not less masterly. Its somewhat Zolaistic and documentary order accrues no doubt from the more deliberate marshalling of types. Howells has here been under necessity of exhibit-

[11] *The Undiscovered Country* (1908), p. 307.

ing in smaller compass a representative variety of charlatans and their habitués.

His interest in psychic problems did not wane. *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890), one of the episodes which entangle our friends the Marches, must be mentioned because it pursues the matter of dreams over onto the borderland of the speculative, although it has next to no value as a study of such a problem, being primarily concerned with morbid psychology. The crucial matter of divination is needlessly evaded. It is a pale and melancholy book, unrelieved by the light of normal intelligences, a light which the Marches should furnish, but which they do not. The subject himself seems no more sick of soul than all those who live after him in the shadow of his dream. In *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897), spiritism appears purely as a realistic accessory, proposing no problem, in the operations of Jackson Durgin and Whitwell with the planchette. Howells' late manner of treating the supernormal may be studied first in the three tales comprising the volume *Questionable Shapes* (1903) — questionable, it should be understood, in the modern, not in the Shakespearian sense suggested by the title. They indicate a familiarity with the *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research. The sophisticated, not to say cynical, atmosphere into which we now emerge is by comparison with *The Shadow of a Dream,* altogether gay.

It is this lightened atmosphere that enables him in the first story of the volume to defy the dictum of ghost-tellers time out of mind that love interest

will not consort with the ghostly mood. What he has really given us is not a weird tale but a magazine comedy in *His Apparition*—apparition being the scientific term for ghost, cleverly evasive of the old but ever-thrilling connotation. The two others are serious studies. *The Angel of the Lord* deals with what is known to morbid psychology as "personification." The hero, haunted by a consciousness of mortality, secludes himself in his country home, where he revels in the English poets of the grave, his obsession being finally personified in the likeness of an angel of the Lord, come to deliver him. *Though One Rose from the Dead,* a study of telepathy and telepathic communication after death, is the most interesting of the group. We shall have occasion to refer to it again, since it relates to the stories of the normal through its peculiar doctrine of love.

In the volume *Between the Dark and the Daylight* (1907) are selected a number of later stories dealing with abnormal phases of consciousness. *A Sleep and a Forgetting* ingeniously gives a speculative turn to the trite theme of suspension of memory. "I was wondering," says Lanfear, "whether in some other possible life our consciousness would not be more independent of what we have been than it seems to be here. I mean whether there shall not be something absolute in our existence, whether it shall not realize itself more in each experience of the moment, and not be always seeking to verify itself from the past." *The Eidolons of Brooks Alford* builds a pretty romance of the magazine variety upon the psychophysical phenomenon suggested by its title, by

which images present in the mind of the hero are externated in his physical vision. *A Memory that Worked Overtime* is likewise suggested by its title, a humorous episode quite possibly indebted to the research of the late Hugo Münsterberg. *A Case of Metaphantasmia* gives a farcical turn to the matter of dream transference, a subject richly documented by the *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research, by having a nightmare communicated to a sleeping-car full of passengers.

These interesting adventures in the psychical were delayed by Howells' absorption in the more pragmatic problem of the personal conscience. At the time of *The Undiscovered Country* (1880) he had already been fascinated by the phenomenon known as the New England conscience, that "grim aftercrop of Puritanism," he somewhere calls it, which flourishes so long after blue law has perished. He had noted the infection in *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879), and continued his study of it in many later books, but in *Dr. Breen's Practice* (1881) he gave us its apotheosis. Grace Breen is the encyclopedian creation who unites in herself all the morbid manifestations of a "hypochondria of the soul" which has outlived its religious phase and persists in the ethical condition. Grace has undertaken the medical profession with the sole idea of service, and plans to go to one of the great factory towns, there to begin practice among the operatives. Her plans are interfered with by her duty to a private patient, thrust upon her in the person of an old school friend, Mrs. Maynard, invalided and separated from her hus-

band (it is not difficult to understand why). She represents perverse femininity in the most vicious form that Howells had imagined up to the time the novel was written. To this deadly combination is added the nagging of Grace's mother, Mrs. Breen. "She was an old lady, who had once kept a vigilant conscience for herself; but after making her life unhappy with it for some three-score years, she now applied it entirely to the exasperation and condemnation of others. She especially devoted it to fretting a New England girl's naturally morbid sense of duty in her daughter, and keeping it in the irritation of perpetual self-question."[12]

The early portion of the book suffers from a gloom like that of the later *Fennel and Rue* (1908), though by no means so implacable in its analysis as that sinister study. It merely lacks the fine chiaroscuro to which Howells has habituated us. The lighter character of Mr. Libby is too inconsequent, lacks the weight necessary for relief. He is the nice young man we know so well. Even the first part, however, is superior to *Fennel and Rue* by virtue of its motivation and its strongly limned characters, but above all in its earthiness. It is grey and neutral, but substantial, being given a mundane atmosphere through the modulated though sombre tones of beach and sea. *Fennel and Rue* is Henry James reduced to morbidity; but there is an exultant and barbaric note in *Dr. Breen's Practice* which is Charlotte Brontë having suffered a sea-change.

In this novel Howells is reticent with analysis,

[12] *Dr. Breen's Practice* (1881), p. 13.

but implacable in conjoining the forces which unite in their savage energy to keep this poor girl faithful to her false ideal. If there were but a drop of human sympathy and tenderness in the relation of Grace and her patient, if the sacrifice were ennobled by a love which could sometimes shake itself free from the clutch of duty, if a spark of gratitude could only flame steadily for a little space, it would not so wear the nerves. Mrs. Maynard, however, is incapable of anything but sparks; her métier is to exhibit feminine whims and vagaries. The peevishness of the patient, the withered conscience of the mother, the live and quivering conscience of Grace, stirred to redoubled action by the force of advanced ideas, all form a manifold that fairly grills the nerves. At last, like a shaft of sunlight, enters Dr. Mulbridge with his brutal declaration: "I'm *not* a doctor of divinity." He laughs her conscience to scorn, but counts upon it to win him her hand, knowing that she cannot fulfill her life's plan alone. In the supreme struggle, however, love conquers duty. The conspiring forces overreach themselves, and the girl, in an intoxication of freedom, not only gives herself to the man she loves, but plans to go to Boston for a season of opera. But, alas, this orgy consummated, and the supreme æsthetic dissipation of a trip to Italy realized, she is a Puritan still, and her husband mercifully finds a way for her to turn her professional training to account in the service of his operatives' children. "At the end of the ends," comments her author, "she was a Puritan; belated, misdated, if the reader will, and cast upon good works for the

consolation which the Puritans formerly found in a creed. Riches and ease were sinful to her, and somehow to be atoned for; and she had no real love for anything that was not of an immediate humane and spiritual effect.'' [13]

The consensus of reviewers finds in *Dr. Breen's Practice* an anti-feminist document, on account of its heroine's failure in a profession at a time when women were beginning to enter the professions. There is more evidence for regarding it as a satire on the medical profession in general. Likewise, *An Imperative Duty* (1891) was received as a discussion of the race problem, because its heroine, whose grandmother was a negress, marries a white man. It would be difficult to refute any one who should insist upon a polemic intent in the earlier novel, but *An Imperative Duty* so clearly discourages such unwarranted divination that it may serve as a warning applicable to the case of its predecessor. The ending, in which Olney marries Rhoda and takes her to Italy, where she passes for an Italian, almost universally pronounced a weak solution, is transparently intended to preclude raising the question at all. If offered as a solution, the word *weak* would fail to describe it. The real question is whether Rhoda's aunt, Mrs. Meredith, another exemplar of the prodigious conscience, is duty bound to reveal a secret which would bring tragedy into at least two lives. It is a more intense and scathing dramatic exposition than *Dr. Breen's Practice* of how the ''Puritan civilization has carried the cult of the personal conscience into mere dutiola-

[13] *Dr. Breen's Practice* (1881), p. 270.

try." [14] I do not know how critical obtuseness has rendered Howells ranker injustice than in accusing him of dealing flippantly with the race problem. Olney's joking is a pathetic effort to draw his wife out of her morbid self-probing and self-denunciation, for she had inherited too little from "the sunny-natured antetypes of her mother's race," too little of "the heaven-born cheerfulness with which it meets contumely and injustice." [15] He is not successful in combating her sense of guilt, any more than love and Italy could infuse the joy of life apart from service into the Calvinized soul of Grace Breen. Of course, Howells' pity for the black people is infinite, imperiously dictated by his ever-present sense of humanity, but *An Imperative Duty* is not a brief for them, being concerned only with the problem which its title states. The only sort of equality it demands for them is equality before their Maker, an ideal which its author finds more nearly realized in the Church of Rome than in any of the Protestant denominations.

The same passion for pointing a moral of easy applicability has discovered *A Woman's Reason* (1883) to be an educational tract, a book for all rich girls to read and take to heart against the time when their papas must die insolvent and leave them to battle alone against a cruel and sordid world which would deny them bread. The fact is that Helen Harkness, had she been given the advantage of a business and industrial education, would nevertheless have been at an insuperable

[14] *An Imperative Duty* (1891), p. 132.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 149.

disadvantage in the economic struggle, for she too has the demoniacal conscience. She has also her quota of that New England stubbornness of will with which Mrs. Wilkins-Freeman so freely endows her provincial characters. This trait is a breeder of woes more prolific for Helen than the conscience, but worse than either is her native shallowness and general incompetency to cope with any situation. Furthermore, her lover, Robert Fenton, who might have brought her to her senses, is, impossible though it may seem, more incompetent than she, which calls to mind sundry observations of Balzac on the difficulties of demonstrating anything from the conduct of shallow persons. In fact, the spectacle of Miss Harkness among the bread-winners argues more feebly than the frank and simple caricature of the pampered daughter of society delivered in the person of Muriel, the heroine of *A Sea-Change*. No sort of education, in short, is potent to produce a Helen Harkness.

Her sad story, which is doubled in length by the accident of a ship's breaking its shaft, is made possible at all only by Fenton's folly in taking her at her word when she says she cannot be his, whereupon he secures a post in China, through exchange with a brother officer. Even then, Mrs. Butler "felt that all Helen need really do was to go to Europe with her, and return to marry Robert Fenton as soon as he could get leave to come home."[16] Instead, the interim is passed in futile attempts at financial independence, the finer sensibilities dictating that she give away what little

[16] *A Woman's Reason* (1883), p. 170.

money she has. In the case of her giving up her entire estate of five thousand dollars, against the vehement advice of her lawyer, we are left to understand that there actually was fraud in the auction by which it was saved to her, the selling price of her father's property being run up by fictitious bids. But the facts in the case were unknown to Helen in her quixotic determination; so we can applaud, if we care to applaud, only the triumph of feminine divination.

The most unconvincing episode is her endeavor to make a living by ceramics, an episode which surely overleaps its author's purpose, posing this exemplar of the fine sensibilities in a hopelessly vulgar light. To take her painted vases to a jeweler's shop, she must needs ride in a carriage; and finding that she is known to the dealer, she is utterly unable to explain what she wants done with her wares, but makes an ignominious flight. She finally succeeds in leaving them at another shop. She actually survives the shame of seeing her work exposed to the public for sale. But then comes the catastrophe, the last ignominy to which she helplessly succumbs. Some of the vases are sold. Now, even were one willing to take it on trust that a "lady" would be outraged on learning that some one had purchased her vases painted for that purpose, what stretch of imagination could picture her venting her wrath upon the innocent shopkeeper, or indignantly demanding of the purchaser the motive for his insolence?

There has here occurred a temporary but interesting breakdown of Howells' objective technique, a natural result of employing so fine an instru-

ment on crude stock materials. His efforts at detachment are laborious, and it is difficult to say whether Helen suffers the more from idealization or ridicule. He now feels it necessary to cajole his reader into an admiration for her "fine sensibilities" and again, as in the episode of the vases, lunges boldly into satire, in perfect confidence that the reader catches her ladylike witchery. Her story would pass with slight alteration either for one of those familiar tales of the noble poor, such as Octave Feuillet's *Roman d'un Jeune Homme Pauvre,* or for a capital burlesque of them. The satiric note is struck again and again, as in Helen's romantic notion of being in humble circumstances when Robert comes to claim her: "Don't you see? I must be here, and I must be wretched, to be perfectly true to him." [17] Then come explanations. "She saw the reasonableness of pain," it is urged, "that to a coarser sense would only have been ludicrous." [18]

But Helen's story is only the half. The agonies of Fenton, who after the separation is attacked by a malignant nostalgia and love-sickness, might have been copied out of some mediæval adaptation of Ovid, did not the heroes of courtly romance know better how to ease their malady. He furiously resents all attempts to send him home; but the poor doctor, who is treated worse than the purchaser of Helen's vases, finally has him ordered back with dispatches. The doctor's relief, however, is not shared by the reader. Fearful adventures are brought to pass on coral islands,

[17] *A Woman's Reason* (1883), p. 212.
[18] *Ibid.,* p. 205.

among man-eating sharks and what not, which prolong indefinitely the separation of the lovers.

This portion of the novel warrants careful scrutiny by students of the narrative art, for it exhibits a curious technical perversion to which Howells is very naturally subject in writing romance. Instead of aiming to induce that "voluntary suspension of disbelief" which Coleridge fixed upon as the desideratum in dealing poetically with the supernatural, and which all skilful romancers like Marion Crawford and Robert Louis Stevenson secure in dealing fictionally with the improbable, he undertakes to inspire conviction by forestalling his reader in pointing out the impossibility of his events, seeming to point with pride to his realism in dissipating the spirit and aroma of adventure. The motive will at first blush strike the reader as either amateurishly apologetic or satiric, but he will finally come to view the author in the naïve attitude of assuring him that, whereas such things have hitherto happened only in cheap romances, here, strange to say, we have them occurring in actual fact. This curious literary self-consciousness, I am sorry to say, is not a sporadic manifestation in Howells' art, oddly as it consorts with an art so fine; it first appeared as the comparatively innocuous mannerism noted in *Their Wedding Journey,* and is indeed innocuous enough in *A Woman's Reason* so long as the events to which he is calling attention are natural and real.

He carefully calls our attention to the "series of trivial chances" employed in contriving Helen's story—"those chances of real life which one must

hesitate to record because they have so much the air of having been contrived!"[19] One can only regret the intrusions of this mannerism, since the coincidences that call them forth stand on their own merits. Sometimes they are lifelike and amusing, sometimes unreal. The special Providence, as Jessie Butler declares it, which arranges that Helen shall meet Lord Rainford, her noble suitor, at Mrs. Wilson's, after being hurried there to avoid him, is well engineered, for example; but there is a distressing insincerity about the "trivial chance" by which Margaret's husband is blown up at the glass works. He was a coarse fellow who objected in very unrefined terms to Helen's coming in and breaking up his home; but his taking off was not in punishment for this, as the reader is left to suppose, but solely to permit Margaret to resume her duties as Helen's housekeeper without the indecorum of a quarrel. Robert is at hand; the Fenton home would not be complete without Margaret, and nothing must be suffered to mar the happiness in which the long tale draws to its close. We do not here detect that solicitude for the happiness of laboring men which is shortly to loom so large in Howells' work—after he no longer permitted himself to turn aside from his real work to do romancing.

It must not be believed that such a piece of—"nefarious art," John M. Robertson brands it, is characteristic of this period of Howells' career as a novelist. It was permitted immediately to follow the strong and sincere novel, *A Modern In-*

[19] *A Woman's Reason* (1883), p. 453.

*stance* (1882), and it in turn was followed by *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884), one of the very highest reaches of his art. Immediately before *A Modern Instance* appeared another inferior work, *A Fearful Responsibility* (1881), but in this novel —or novelette—the author does not take his responsibilities as an artist quite so lightly as he did in *A Woman's Reason.*

The invalid professor in this story, Owen Elmore, who goes abroad during the Civil War to work on what is referred to as a national enterprise, since so many Americans projected it,—a history of Venice,—has neither the brains nor the spine to bear a responsibility. The responsibility is nevertheless foisted upon him in the person of a young sister of one of his wife's friends, and the international drama begins. What fills the soul of the professor with trembling and dismay is the prospect of Miss Mayhew's making acquaintances in an unconventional manner, not his real duty to investigate and appraise the worth of the young Austrian officer whose acquaintance she does make. Horror of the unconventional situation paralyzes him, precluding all the useful efforts that a sane and normal man might make in behalf of his charge. His brutal dismissal of Von Ehrhardt, whose letter enclosing the proposal of marriage he acknowledges "touchingly brave and fine,"[20] causes him poignant remorse later, but that helps the story very little. The pity is that Von Ehrhardt is dismissed by the author as well as by his crazy hero. This is regrettable not merely because he makes fair promise of becom-

[20] *A Fearful Responsibility* (1881), p. 78.

ing one of the most valuable and original contributions to the foreign sketches, a complement to the trifling officers drawn in *The Lady of the Aroostook* and *Indian Summer,* but because without knowing him we can make nothing of Lily's disappointment. The author's way of patching this up is to take away the disappointment. He descends unwillingly to exegesis; but presently, almost congratulating us on our ignorance of the facts, he begins to hint that Elmore's regrets were unfounded, and that Lily, after all her agonies, did not care so very much. It finally appears, then, that the only person whom the story could possibly concern is Elmore, who would have made a tragedy of life under any circumstances.

"He could not at once realize that the tragedy of this romance, such as it was, remained to him alone, except perhaps as Ehrhardt shared it. With him, indeed, Elmore still sought to fret his remorse and keep it poignant, and his final failure to do so made him ashamed. But what lasting sorrow can one have from the disappointment of a man whom one has never seen? If Lily could console herself, it seemed probable that Ehrhardt too had 'got along.' "[21]

The reader may pertinently ask here, as in connection with *A Woman's Reason,* what has befallen Howells with his great principle of objectivity and detachment; and here again I think it may fairly be answered that he has not flagged in his strife to attain it. His method, however, has defeated its own end. Thus, the suppression of

[21] *A Fearful Responsibility* (1881), p. 163.

fact which necessitates the descent to bald exegesis is presumably in the interest of detachment, to convey a strikingly veracious impression of life's incertitude for the casual observer. The death of Mrs. Meredith in *An Imperative Duty* is a successful instance; but aloofness for its own sake, as we have it in *A Fearful Responsibility,* is hardly worth while. We are here invited to take delight in a situation not "subject to interpretation," as Henry James liked his situations, but subject merely to pointless guessing. It is not so that certain French masters who have made a fetich of objectivity dispose their materials. How artfully De Maupassant contrives that nothing shall be withheld, and that what is given shall have its full effect! Howells, in this story, by getting himself so deeply engrossed in his poor professor's qualms and fears, deprives him of some of his best effects and actually fails to bring off the one big joke of his career. De Maupassant, without injustice to the merits of Owen Elmore, would have raised hilarious laughter at his being recalled to America to become the head of a military college.

I have dwelt on these two stories of Howells not for the sake of passing judgment upon them but to illustrate in the first instance his incapacity for handling second-rate materials, and in the second a limitation of his literary method which does not often betray itself so disastrously, but which does lend some of his highly successful stories an air of being mere *tours de force. The Story of a Play* (1898), for example, is a dazzling piece of technique but leaves with its reader a certain sense

not of futility perhaps, but of undue lavishness in the means by which it brings about its simple end. This novel gives us the private history of Mr. Brice Maxwell's first play, from composition through the vicissitudes of placing and rehearsal to final triumph. Mrs. Maxwell, who will be remembered by readers of *The Quality of Mercy* as Miss Louise Hilary, has allowed a good deal of her own courtship to be written into her husband's play, and sentimental memories color her whole attitude toward it. The situation is further complicated by the presence in the cast of the actor Launcelot Godolphin, whose instinct for collaboration, and whose capacity for inspired clap-trap, which he wishes incorporated into the drama that is to make his fortune, may be feebly inferred from his name. The crisis is brought about by the discovery of a real emotional actress with "smouldering eyes," who promises to assure the success of the production, but who takes away the honors from Godolphin and by the liberal infusion of passion violates everything in the play that makes it sacred to Louise. Now this, which is in reality a very simple problem, becomes an intrigue of astonishing complexity as the author carries it on through chapter after chapter without once condescending to take his side with any participant. Here is clearly a case in which the verbal art, however cunning, cannot give the full effect of life. One personal attendance at rehearsal would solve for the spectator the whole problem of the woman with the smouldering eyes. With nothing but what an impartial author is willing to give us, however, we must witness the thing from a thousand angles

and collect the most amazing variety of evidence. The defect of this method as here displayed is that we are really more concerned with the adroitness of the author than with the aspirations of any of his characters. The objection to calling it a shallow or superficial method, however, is that in the process we secure accurate measures of the jealousy and sentimentality of Louise and arrive at a comprehension of her mind and heart such as we could never have attained had the author told us all about them.

To show Howells' method in the fulness of its triumph it is unnecessary to turn to the more ambitious works, *A Modern Instance* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham,* that appeared at the time of *A Woman's Reason* and *A Fearful Responsibility.* These will be treated in the next chapter. In *Indian Summer* (1885) he achieved what seems to me perfection in the vein of *The Lady of the Aroostook.* I am quite unable to follow my favorite commentator, John M. Robertson, in his dissatisfaction with this book; I can only with difficulty catch the point of view, a thoroughly unsympathetic one, from which the ending in which the fat Adonis of forty is "severed from the too initiative young woman and saved to the too obstructive widow" appears "so merely childish as to move derision." [22] This ending was begun on the very first page of the novel.

In his attitude toward the personages of the story, Howells is happy throughout, but signally so in the case of Imogene Grahame, the romantic young lady. To the reader who keeps Helen

[22] *Essays Toward a Critical Method* (1889), p. 115.

Harkness in mind, Imogene must appear a veritable triumph of the author over himself, so complete is his superiority to her. He never leaves us with the suspicion that her sentimental notions are not her very own. He sometimes goes out of his way to portray her from a fresh angle, but these occasions, such as the one on which he employs a whole band of German students, are always welcome.

The principal characters are not precisely sensible people, but they are quite different from the mental weaklings of *A Fearful Responsibility.* Hence, though their situation is essentially of their own making, they prove something. They illustrate life in a selective phase, a highly selective phase, perhaps beyond or beneath the reach of a more pretentious art. Certainly the problem of love between persons of disparate ages is embellished with subtler shades of thought and feeling than Turgeniev had opportunity to display in his serious treatment of the theme. And I can think of no one who in a novel has elaborated with such a wealth of exquisite nuance, and with so keen an eye for its humorous and whimsical as well as its pathetic aspects, the emotion voiced with divine despair in Tennyson's immortal lyric, "Tears, Idle Tears."

Theodore Colville is no hero, but it is readily understood why he became a successful Indiana journalist, while a godlike imagination is required to figure Owen Elmore at the head of a military college or Robert Fenton as a naval officer. Colville has just crossed the meridian of forty, when political reverses and freedom from professional

duties turn him toward Europe and youthful dreams of architecture. Age, he discovers, has brought in its disillusionments—and he has not yet lived. He suffers a cosmic incompatibility, more acutely than James' Christopher Newman; and even as Christopher, he makes a desperate, sometimes despairing effort to play the *flâneur*. He achieves a very complex, a fatal state of mind and heart in which to meet Imogene Grahame, so beautiful, so susceptible, so keenly interested in his emotional history, so eager to sacrifice herself for some noble ideal. This follows a chance encounter with his old acquaintance Mrs. Bowen on the Ponte Vecchio. Mrs. Bowen, a charming widow, until we know her better, just in the bloom of maturity, is placed in a delicate situation as Imogene's protectress. The devious course by which Imogene's sacrifice is averted to her advantage must be followed leisurely to be enjoyed.

Howells has done nothing more enjoyable in his lighter vein, combining as this story does the salient features of the international novel, the love romance, and the conscience story, without excess, over-emphasis, or disproportion. Colville is somewhat obtuse, as must be, but he does not share the monumental stupidity of Ford, the lover in *The Undiscovered Country*. He proves his courage in an accident, but an accident free from the heroics of *The Lady of the Aroostook*. And he champions the social institutions of American democracy wisely if not so well as certain earlier and later compatriots. In the picturesque quality of its Florentine setting the novel does not fall below the high excellence to which Howells has habituated

us, although this feature is less ornately accomplished than the Venetian background against which *A Foregone Conclusion* plays. *Indian Summer* is, in a word, a sublimated synthesis of the elements that define the so-called early manner, though that manner be a scant respecter of chronology.

The novels immediately succeeding *Indian Summer* mark Howells' return in deadly earnest to his researches in morbid conscientiousness. In *The Minister's Charge; or the Apprenticeship of Lemuel Barker* (1887) we encounter the dawn of Tolstoian humanitarianism, but a dark and cheerless dawn, scarcely distinguishable from the sullen twilight of Puritanism. It is the precursor of the sociological novels, avowedly Tolstoian, which begin with *Annie Kilburn* (1888); but these will be spoken of in a later chapter. Meanwhile, in *April Hopes* (1888), he turned off a love story in more playful mood, but impregnated by the two themes then engrossing him, contemporary Puritanism and social democracy.

I cannot but rank *April Hopes* a little below *Indian Summer,* although Robertson, who did not like *Indian Summer* at all, pronounces it "a complete success." The two are alike in being comprehensively characteristic of Howells' lighter manner, but in the later book the conscience motive, for one thing, is a trifle overworked for a story calculated, as we may presume it is, to demonstrate

> "how this spring of love resembleth
> The uncertain glory of an April day."

The weather is conspicuously lacking in glory. Gloriously to show forth the infection of love demands a heroine of more wholesome normality than Alice Pasmer, who, one must agree with Miss Anderson, is, if not positively morbid, something very like it. "I think she's moybid, Alice is," Miss Anderson comments. "She isn't moybid in the usual sense of the woyd, but she expects more of herself and of the woyld generally than anybody's going to get out of it." [23] Alice is a *pastiche* of Turgeniev's Liza, who has lent her loveliness to many of the Howells girls, but she suffers by being put through some of Liza's emotional experiences without the visible situation to call them forth. She contemplates taking the veil ridiculously early. The story opens with a leisurely description of a Harvard class day, where Alice has been reminded she is sure to meet her fate, a consummation requiring five hundred pages or something less of misgivings, disagreements, and reconciliations, and after which the curtain falls on a Jane Austenian note, presaging storms ahead, but hardly resonant enough. We groan for them.

But despite the spirituality of its heroine, *April Hopes* is a gay book. The love story is constantly enlivened by sketches of the Boston aristocracy, introducing the Coreys and the Bellinghams, known of old. Harvard men may like the college color even less than that in *The Landlord at Lion's Head,* since a more deliberately destructive touch is brought to bear upon the vaunted democracy and fellowship of student life. The

[23] *April Hopes* (1888), p. 90.

effect, however, is not essentially different from that of the more sympathetic *Harvard Episodes* of Charles M. Flandrau. The thesis, which seems ably defended, is that the world has little to teach these undergraduates of worldliness and snobbery. Mrs. Pasmer, Alice's mother, is the *chef-d'œuvre* of aristocratic portraiture, mistress of all the ridiculous social arts of feigned unconsciousness, simulated surprises, and persistent fibbing. None can approach her excellence in accenting those most damning words in the parlance of the elect: "We don't know anything about them."

One of the most delightful of these lighter transcripts of manners is *The Coast of Bohemia* (1893), in which Howells turns, after the severer sociological researches of *Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), and *The Quality of Mercy* (1892), to the artistic world of the metropolis or rather to the fringes of that world, for his theme. All the old problems are with us in a fresh atmosphere and informed by the presence of a very grateful motive, not new actually of course, but new in its pervasive effect upon the story, the variegated follies of the artistic temperament. The ostensible heroine, Cornelia Saunders, an inveterate self-analyst, and a second Helen Harkness in pride, tries in vain to spoil the story and make it only a less impossible version of *A Woman's Reason.* In this attempt she is frustrated by the presence of her foil, Charmian Maybough.

It was a structural master-stroke to make Charmian, the chief sufferer with the disease, the ar-

tistic temperament, at the same time the one fundamentally well-balanced and clear-sighted character in the novel. Charmian's favorite maxim is that art is all one, in accordance with which she makes up her deficiencies in drawing by leading the artistic life, that is, so far as her step-mother, who is passionately devoted to the conventions, will allow her. Her innate common sense, which Howells conceals from the reader as artfully as she conceals it from herself, restrains her from disrupting the family peace, so that she lives her double life of respectability and art in serene complacency. Giving up her mother as a hopeless slave to society, she revels in martyrdom, and cleverly arranges her studio in their apartments with a low-hung canvas ceiling to simulate poverty. Here she finds an exquisite freedom from the "unreality" of the life to which she must return as part of the bargain, and makes heroic efforts to smoke cigarettes. From this vantage point she wafts her breezy comments on the social customs of her mother's kind. "And *my* one luxury is going home alone," she confides on one occasion. "Mamma doesn't allow it, except to and from the Synthesis. Then I'm an art student and perfectly safe. If I were a young lady my life wouldn't be worth anything."[24] The foolish tragedy of Cornelia supplies her with an orgy of romance. The significant thing about her participation, however, is that when the affair has become too preposterous even for her to maintain an ecstasy in it, she is the only one who realizes that the thing has been played out. Charmian is

[24] *The Coast of Bohemia* (1893), p. 164.

the *clou* of the book. Though she is presented as a fantastic creation, her eccentricity is erected on normal substratum, and she is constantly saving the aberrant natures surrounding her from lapsing into vapidity.

*Ragged Lady* (1899), in which the international theme is resumed and the love and conscience problems continued, has no such savior as Charmian Maybough, but needs her less. This novel has a quite extraordinary charm in detail, and cannot be omitted by those interested in Puritanism or desiring proof that the possibilities of morbid conscientiousness in its personal applications are exhaustless. In *Dr. Breen's Practice,* Howells fully exposed the sheer inhumanity of dutiology, but he has in this lighter tale uncovered new and interesting aspects of the matter.

In *The Kentons* (1902), the most popular of Howells' later novels, we continue to observe spirituality in its Mid-Western condition. Miss Ellen Kenton is a typical maiden of the tearful and conscience-stricken type, who ends by accusing herself of "a certain essential levity of nature." From her unselfishness spring all the woes of the Kenton family. Here again, I am afraid that Howells in his desire to do his creation justice has slipped into too effective a sympathy for her. Miss Ellen is exalted for her spiritual qualities greatly to the disadvantage of her slangy, minx-like, conscience-free, but wholesome-hearted sister, Lottie, who for all her wilful ways, brings no such grief to her parents. That this partiality does not lack an appreciative audience, moreover, is proved by the remarks of Professor William

Lyon Phelps, who discovers something very fine in the fact that Lottie, with her lively charm for men, is retired as "an admirable wife and housekeeper," [25] while Ellen, whose lack of such charm is lamented, is left "preserving in her wealthy environment all the fruits of the spirit." This is to set the shade of the moral Richardson abroad. Surely such is not the spirit of American realism.

*The Kentons* is the chronicle of an Ohio family in flight over two continents in order to save their daughter from an unfortunate love affair. Its main thesis may seem to reduce to absurdity the proposition that American parents are helpless and afraid before their children; but the marvels of American parenthood are in fact beyond belief, and when the international situation is arrived at, much trenchant comment results. The Kenton girls are less qualified than the Lydia Bloods and Clementina Claxons of Howells' imagination to bring Europe to its knees, and this circumstance introduces a fresh note into the European criticism. A neat point is scored when an amiable Dutch lady, having observed the actions of Miss Ellen, remarks to Mrs. Kenton that her daughter evidently has not been long married.

In *Letters Home* (1903), which, notwithstanding Howells' declaration, apropos of Richardson, in *Heroines of Fiction,* that nobody writes novels in letters any more, appears in epistolary form, we find the New England conscience afflicting a young man instead of a sentimental maid, and a young man from as far west as Iowa, Mr. Wallace

[25] "William Dean Howells," in *Essays on Modern Novelists* (1910), pp. 56-81.

Ardith, who has come to New York for a literary career. There is a lady also, Miss Dennam, a contemporary Puritan from a village in western New York settled by New England people, who has her principles pretty well frayed in the course of her metropolitan experiences. If there is any doubt that the quest after righteousness may be more productive of suffering than a thoroughly selfish course, the history of Mr. Wallace Ardith ought to dispel it. An absorbing feature of this history is the attempt on the part of those interested to fix the responsibility, although in the end they lay it all to fate. *Letters Home* also adds a portrait to the Howells gallery of self-made millionaires—that of old Ralston, quite worthy to hang beside those of Lapham and Dryfoos; and Miss America Ralston has her points of superiority to the Lapham and the Dryfoos girls.

Of the last phase of Howells' work as a novelist, his return in reminiscent mood and with something of the historian's intent to his native Ohio, I shall speak later. The next to last phase, represented by the two novels, *Miss Bellard's Inspiration* (1905) and *Fennel and Rue* (1908), which together with an Altrurian (Utopian) romance follow the very high achievement of *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), is a sort of decadence into the psychological manner. In these books there is more of Henry James and less of Jane Austen than in any other two from his pen. *Fennel and Rue* is an elaborate piece of vivisection. Although the scene is a hospitable home thrown open for the Christmas revels, it is not gay. But it does feature a type which fascinated Howells

and with which, in whatever excess of analysis, he was never to know failure or anything like it—the fatuous mother of a morbidly egoistic son.

*Miss Bellard's Inspiration* has the characteristic gaiety which is lacking in *Fennel and Rue,* but it is a kind of joke on the reader. In technical execution it is superb and of a quality with the farces, but it ends not with the logic of a farce but with a play on words. We find in it Howells' repertoire of whimsical variations on the themes of love and marriage, all rendered with a virtuosity that precludes ennui. The greater part of the minor action is illustrative of the innate contrariety of women. The major theses are two: that love is a bar to marital happiness after the first stages have been traversed, and that intellectuality avails nothing in combination with femininity. In support of the latter, Miss Lillias Bellard, lecturer on oratory in a Western college, is offered, while the sad case of Mr. and Mrs. Mevison, who are loving and fighting each other toward a final separation under the hospitable roof of the Crombies, is evidence for the former. They are reminiscent of the Alderlings in *Though One Rose from the Dead;* in fact, theirs is a theme upon which Howells felt deeply. "Love," he told A. Schade Van Westrum, "is for the springtime of life; in maturity it pales, in the most fortunate cases into a beautiful friendship, into loyalty rewarded by contentment, which is a more enduring prize than the ill-defined state vaguely described as happiness." [26] Now, Miss

[26] "Mr. Howells on Love and Literature" in *Lamp* (1904), 28:28.

Bellard, intellectual, emancipated, knowing that she and Mr. Claybourne love each other too much, and with the horrible example of the Mevisons before her, not to mention the "sweet intimacy" of her aunt and uncle, does not yield easily. She heartlessly insists that there can be no room for two such couples in the world, and they must learn to love each other much less before the union can be thought of, until suddenly she has an inspiration. The logical argument by which she appeases her intellect, is Howells' neatest compliment to the emancipated woman.

A completely domesticated man was Howells, who liked to read plays in his arm-chair better than to go to the theatre. George Moore's vision of him, which must in that day have been intended to confer a final damnation, is essentially true, much truer than the inept aphorism so often quoted:

"I see him the happy father of a numerous family; the sun is shining, the girls and boys are playing on the lawn, they come trooping in to a high tea, and there is dancing in the evening." [27]

For all that he has made of love in its springtime, he is more successful with age. His young lovers never quite compare in effectiveness with the elderly pair in the background, or, by rare fortune, as in *The Rise of Silas Lapham* or *The Son of Royal Langbrith,* in the foreground. The Kentons, who have attained that beautiful state of contentment which is the prize of loyalty, are the *clou* of their book, without which Ellen's lovesick-

[27] *Confessions of a Young Man* (1906), p. 143.

ness would be shorn of meaning; and the Dry-fooses, and the Gaylords, many others come trooping up.

Those who complain of Howells' treatment of young love are invariably mistaken in attributing their dissatisfaction to his conventionality. The trouble lies not in his acceptance of social convention for his young people but in his repudiation of literary convention for them. I do not believe it has been noted that if one were to construct a Howells doctrine of love, it would destroy precept upon precept the traditional creed of fiction, which is essentially romantic. The spirit of his work is often a spirit of literary criticism and only after that a criticism of life. I do not mean that at these times he writes from the closet; he writes from close contact with the life he pictures, but in his function as realistic novelist, he embraces that contact with the spirit of an evangelist. And no missionary was ever content with the eternal verities. The result in his work is that, not content to record life as he sees it, he must needs record it as others, inclusively branded romanticists, do not see it. Most of the flaws are left by a talent that overleaps itself in excess of zeal. The stupidity of his lovers, for example, which makes it all but impossible for them to know that they are in love, is owing to no lack of passion on their part, but to an uncontrollable aversion on the part of their author to the notion of love at first sight. He is excessive in his eagerness to demolish the superstition that young women find great joy in the interval before marriage. The virtues of faithfulness and self-sacrifice as they are extolled in Scott,

Dickens, and Thackeray, he finds unsocial and unhumane. Faithfulness after death, such as that of Helen Pendennis, fills him with inextinguishable wrath.

By his willingness to mar a few of his own stories in order to show the obverse of the medal, Howells has had a very salutary effect on contemporary fiction. He has made us critical of traditional notions, some handed down from Ovid, through the courtly singers of Provence, and the whole line of mediæval romancers, some of origins less remote. The general notion of love as a mystic power binding two human beings forever and beyond the grave, he has done his best to make a laughing-stock. This, if anything, has a historical claim upon the term, so sinister from his pen, "romantic," evoking as it does what images of chivalry and courts of love! The knight beholds his lady at her casement, and knows from the instant that they have been celestially bound one to the other; that he must serve and worship her for years until he win her; that if death claim either, the other must follow, or as the least concession to beauty must live a whole life long in wretchedness. If the lady have a husband, it will be his divine consolation to know that their passion cannot injure him, since no double matches are made in heaven! It is not without historical propriety that we stigmatize as romantic those fictions which exist to proclaim an ennobling effect for the most vulgar liaisons.

Equally variable has been the result on his own fiction of Howells' violent revulsion from the grand climaxes, dreadful catastrophes, and star-

tlingly contrived coincidences of fictional tradition. In a number of instances he has wilfully withdrawn every external support from his action. No other realist has carried this exaltation of the character element to such a length, certainly not Jane Austen, nor Valdés. Valdés, indeed, has given us a charming though simple-hearted love story in *José* with the obstacles to happiness completely externalized, the characters being given, and exhibited only as the situation calls them forth. At a point long before the close of *The Undiscovered Country* there is but one obstacle to Ford's happiness, his own stupidity. This is all that need be said about the weakness of some of Howells' characters. They are subnormal because in the absence of obstacles to overcome it requires subnormal people to make a story. An older interpretation made Hamlet insane; some commentators still find his tragedy in vacillation and delay; but a newer and stronger reading has discovered the heart of his mystery in the inexorable difficulty of his position. Howells has gained much more than he has lost through his natural preoccupation with subjective problems, but as for vitiating a character out of a spirit of sheer bravado, that has been a dead loss. We do not judge *The Undiscovered Country,* however, by the intellectual worth of Ford, who is after all a minor adornment to the tale.

I do not leave this large group of novels that I have elected to treat as transcripts of American life without a disturbing consciousness of having rendered inadequate tribute to the national spirit that receives expression in them. Not only are

they the product of a mind tireless in the contemplation of the national life, but they proceed from a heart that cherished dearly the very rudimentary principles that actuated our forefathers. They constitute the only large and significant body of fiction inspired by the spirit of American democracy. The social problems which he dealt with very simply in his first novel never ceased to engage his attention; and although he never expressed the four million with the intimacy of Mark Twain or of O. Henry, he always spoke for them and tested the aristocracy and plutocracy which have taken foothold on our soil by the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity for which we still profess to stand.

How subtly this concern for the equalities has insinuated itself into the texture of his theme, whether that theme be light or profound, grave or gay, without ever disturbing the dramatic range, and without any dictatorial airs, is nowhere more evident than in the last novel that we are to have from his hand, his one posthumous work, *The Vacation of the Kelwyns,* prepared for publication ten years ago, but withheld by his own wish, from motives not dissimilar to those which led to the suppression of *Private Theatricals.* In *The Vacation of the Kelwyns,* which comes from the press as I write (September, 1920), sub-titled An Idyl of the Middle Eighteen-Seventies,—to be precise, the Centennial summer,—he has given us primarily, to be sure, a cool but eloquent pastoral, playing on the country roadsides near a community of New England Shakers, from whom the Kelwyns have taken a place for the summer—a

simple chronicle with certain colorful distractions in the way of a dancing bear, some Gipsy fortune-tellers, and roving organ-grinders, together with a choice of less picturesque wayfarers; a chronicle into which is deftly woven the love story of Parthenope Brook, a cousin of artistic leanings, who comes out to visit her kinsfolk and to acquire, if possible, a "fresh point of view." But Howells, in his own serene and unobtrusive way, has made these quiet materials into a study not merely in social atmospheres but of some ever puzzling though rudimentary problems in the relations between the social orders. We see in the first place the delicate process by which Parthenope's lover, a young man of dubious social and vocational standing, even harboring some loose if not heretical notions on the subject of private property, establishes his gentility. He is the visionary, the experimenter—or, as he holds himself, the "empiricist"—that Howells always loved to draw, but so nearly a "gentleman" from the beginning that his case pales in interest before that offered by the family of Kites, who have been engaged to keep the house, and to whom the farm has been sub-let. The Kelwyns, imbued, as they think themselves, with a quite unsentimental passion for fairness in their dealings with their "inferiors," find the lower classes, as represented by the Kites, of an unsuspected and disturbing complexity, and the most reasonable and simple relations with them amazingly difficult. They never quite achieve human contact with them, but in approximating such contact they do come to a knowledge and sympathy to which they have hitherto been

strangers. And Professor Kelwyn himself, whose business is to give graduate lectures on historical sociology, discovers many valuable things not taken account of in his "studies of the conditions," and arrives as a result of his vacation at a clearer understanding of the sociology of the present.

# VII

## HIS FICTION: STUDIES IN ETHICS

IT is a somewhat heretical and arbitrary procedure to select a comparatively small group of Howells' novels as his contribution to the subjects of social and political ethics. In the totality of his work as well as in the supreme reaches of his art, he has fulfilled the promise of his critical message, with its indissoluble fusion of ethics and æsthetics. Among his stories, however, though they are all of a substance, those which reverberate most loudly to the voice of duty, those in which the characters live in eternal questioning of the rightness or wrongness of their actions, are the ones which will live as *pictures* of our society, as transcripts of manners rather than studies in human character. In *Ragged Lady,* for example, the conscience problem is handled in a specialized condition and an essentially *picturesque* aspect, while in *The Son of Royal Langbrith* the matter for all its local coloring is most compelling in its universal applicability. The questions of human happiness in the latter novel will continue to enlist the efforts of readers at solution, while the difficulties in the former, when they are not indeed phantoms fought by the characters alone, are readily settled in the mind of the humane observer. Likewise, though the ideal of democracy constantly guided his pen,

which limned in so relentlessly the blemishes upon the face of our national life, a distinction may be drawn between the delineation of aristocratic insolence and the less entertaining but more seriously promulgated preaching of social equality.

The two themes are scarcely separable in Howells' novels. Their alliance in genesis is especially close, some of the New England moralists having exchanged their personal dæmons for a race conscience, or, in the most unhappy cases, having rather illogically retained the problem of their own souls' salvation while shouldering the burdens of all humanity. In the New York novels, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) and *The World of Chance* (1893), we emerge into a clearer atmosphere, where the advanced ethical conceptions, for which in the New England novels ministers of the gospel stand spokesmen, are mouthed by venerable and eccentric socialists. But already in *Annie Kilburn* (1888) the point had been made clearly; perhaps Howells never made it more dramatically, and with a preacher for a hero!

*The Minister's Charge* (1887) is best considered here because, like *Annie Kilburn,* it is strictly of the Robert Elsmere and Mark Rutherford period. It belongs in this group, however, only because it poses the social problem in its religious aspect. Otherwise, it is to be classified with *Ragged Lady* as a *picture* of religious conditions and a drama of weaklings. In *Annie Kilburn* we have characters of relatively superior intelligence. The tragedy of its protagonist, the Reverend Mr. Peck, lies in the victory of his humanitarianism over his orthodoxy, while the Reverend Mr. Sewell of *The*

*Minister's Charge,* who will be remembered by readers of *Silas Lapham,* has Mrs. Sewell always at hand to keep him in the straight and narrow path. The consciousness of being his brother's keeper works in his soul an awful and ineffectual spell. And to this obfuscation of brain is added a natural lack of talent for practical helpfulness and a charge stupidly and stubbornly opposed to being helped, the combination resulting in some ludicrous applications of the principle he preached, "that no one for good or for evil, for sorrow or joy, for sickness or health, stood apart from his fellows, but each was bound to the highest and lowest by ties that centered in the hand of God." [1]

Howells achieved one of his most astonishing triumphs in the fascination he contrived to bring out of this clergyman's intellectual history. The most fascinating thing about Sewell is perhaps the worst thing to be held against him—his devotion to his wife. There is something positively dreadful in the circumstance that his responsibility for Lemuel is undertaken against her better judgment, when he praises some verses the country lad has written. So much are we our brothers' keepers that thereupon Mr. Sewell's is the blame that Lemuel comes to Boston, lighted by false fires, and has all his dreadful experiences there. Lemuel's notions of social equality are as eccentric as his guardian's; his sense of guilt as unusual. And he seems to share Helen Harkness' antipathy to money, along with other "fine sensibilities." He loses appetite and starts into a de-

[1] *The Minister's Charge* (1887), p. 458.

cline after kissing a young girl, feeling himself "guilty of an enormity that nothing could ever excuse." [2] Yet Lemuel, for all his smug and pious ways, has his qualities. Mr. Alexander Harvey indeed thinks that in him Howells unwittingly drew a genius. Bromfield Corey, whom readers of *Silas Lapham* again will remember as the aristocratic amateur of the arts, and with whom Lemuel secures a position as reader, is exceedingly drawn to him, and exclaims, after his disappearance: "All my moral and intellectual being has stopped like a watch." [3]

*Annie Kilburn* is a simpler, bolder, and, I think, a more wholesome depiction of the decline of orthodoxy. The New England conscience lives on in Annie, but with a sea-change, for she has taken her Italy not in a volcanic but ineffectual revolt against herself, as Grace Breen took hers, but easily and naturally in an eleven years' residence abroad with her father. She returns to her native land a Puritan still, but a Puritan accessible to new ideas, and finds South Hatboro' electric with them. In the efforts of the Reverend Mr. Peck, the new religion of social service, whose premonitory symptoms were such an agitation in the soul of David Sewell, is finding its expression, and an organization for social "betterment" known as the Social Union is on foot. But the two forces are not at all in accord, Mr. Peck, with his ideal of social equality, being presently brought into active conflict with the Union, with its old ideal of charity, which does so little beyond confirming the

[2] *The Minister's Charge* (1887), p. 167.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 430.

rich in their vanity and snobbishness and the poor in their discontent. Annie, who wants to do good with her money, finds her natural alliance with the Union, and is made, even as all Hatboro', extremely uncomfortable by Mr. Peck. She cannot see the impossibility of friendly intercourse between the poor and their benefactors, having often heard her father say "that the great superiority of the American practice of democracy over the French ideal was that it didn't involve any assumption of social equality."[4] She demands of Mr. Peck:

"Then you mean to say that people can't do any good at all with their money?"

"Money is a palliative, but it can't cure. It can sometimes create a bond of gratitude perhaps, but it can't create sympathy between rich and poor."

"But *why* can't it?"

"Because sympathy — common feeling — can spring only from like experiences, like hopes, like fears. And money can't buy these."[5]

Injured orthodoxy and commercialism have their most interesting protagonist in Mr. Gerrish, who will appear again in *The Quality of Mercy*. His arraignment of the minister after his fatal sermon on the Union theatricals is a masterly disquisition, fully to be appreciated only by those acquainted with Mr. Gerrish:

"Understand me, sir, we do not object, neither I nor any of those who agree with me, to the

[4] *Annie Kilburn* (1888), p. 64.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

preaching of Christ as a life. That is all very well in its place, and it is the wish of every true Christian to conform and adapt his own life as far as—as circumstances will permit of. But when I come to this sanctuary, and *they* come, Sabbath after Sabbath, and hear nothing said of my Redeemer as a—means of salvation, and nothing of Him crucified; and when I find the precious promises of the gospel ignored and neglected continually and—and all the time, and each discourse from yonder pulpit filled up with generalities—glittering generalities, as has been well said by another—in relation to and connection with mere conduct, I am disappointed, sir, and dissatisfied, and I feel to protest against that line of—of preaching."[6]

In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), Howells transfers his scene to New York and spreads an epical canvas. The longest and most complicated of his novels, it has nevertheless proved one of the most popular, and justly so. A vital reason for his success with it lies in the fact that he has furnished himself for the first time with materials lavish enough for the easy and natural attainment of that loose and ample structure which he so admires in the work of Zola and the elder Spaniards. Except in *The Landlord at Lion's Head* he was hardly again to fulfill his own formula so perfectly, although he has rather exceeded the prescription in the matter of action, the moral regeneration of Dryfoos, the capitalist, being brought about by the violent death of his son Conrad. The vast number of personages who

[6] *Annie Kilburn* (1888), p. 273.

share its events, their destinies united now by slender threads and now by bonds of steel, enable him to convey better than he has elsewhere been able to convey it, that feeling for life's confusion and complexity which has ever engaged his artistic sense.

Such a condition, furthermore, is as happy for the polemic interests of the book as for the artistic. It affords a natural escape from the sentimental mood, perhaps the prevailing mood of sociological fiction, which limits the end of so much humanitarian writing to making well-to-do people vaguely uncomfortable, which makes such an innocent production as Galsworthy's *Pigeon* more depressing to many minds than the ghastly tales Arthur Morrison tells of *Mean Streets*. Howells is ordinarily most in danger of excessive sympathy and futile musing when his ordinary, well-to-do, somewhat sensitive people are able to monopolize the foreground. Accordingly, it is significant for the present work that the Marches, ostensibly the central figures, are lost in the welter. They are brought to New York for the purpose of reacting to the social and economic cruelties of metropolitan life, and obediently come "to excel in the sad knowledge of the line at which respectability distinguishes itself from shabbiness,"[7] and to suffer at the sights they see in tenement streets; but they are forced into their proper place in the picture by the multiplicity of more interesting and more rugged types.

From these characters, limned with a virile touch, there is, however, an omission of represen-

[7] *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1891), vol. I, p. 71.

tatives of the *very* low classes,—at least in very unfortunate circumstances,—an omission that will strike the reader of later sociological fiction as a deficiency of Howells' view of our society. This objection he explained away in a manner very similar to that in which he disposed of the sex problems of the Continental novel, remarking on one occasion, I believe, that New York could not furnish Dostoievsky with the materials of his preference. There may at the time have been something to say for this, but less, I suspect, than for the sexual argument. At any rate, the subjects meet with a very unequal disposition in his own fictions. Howells did not like to depict irregular sexual relations, and he did not like to depict humanity unwashed. But he did love humanity in whatever condition; so, while guilty lovers are banished utterly from his stage, the great unwashed cry incessantly behind the scenes. They have able spokesmen in characters like the venerable German socialist Lindau and the "bourgeois intellectual," Conrad Dryfoos, but they themselves do not appear, at least in any very painful guise. The author shrinks with Basil March from concrete suffering, and asks us to shed tears over the general fact that people are hungry. He is willing to leave us, after we have actually seen a poor wretch pick a crust from the gutter, in the belief with which March consoled his wife, that it was after all only a mendicant's ruse for eliciting sympathy. This is more discomforting than a knowledge of the fact would be. By sacrificing such aloofness from the unpleasant and boldly descending into the depths of degradation

he could here and there have put a note of cheer into his message, a note of hope; for, as he so often told us, there is consolation and delight in the truth, and only in the truth.

He also told us that in its apostleship to the lowly, realism inherits the better part of romanticism. "The romantic spirit," he noted long ago, "worshipped genius, worshipped heroism, but at its best, in such a man as Victor Hugo, this spirit recognized the supreme claim of the lowest humanity. Its error was to idealize the victims of society, to paint them impossibly virtuous and beautiful; but truth, which has succeeded to the highest mission of romance, paints these as they are, and bids the world consider them not because they are beautiful and virtuous, but because they are ugly and vicious, cruel, filthy, and only not altogether loathsome because the divine can never wholly die out of the human." [8] Howells has not indeed painted the victims of society as beautiful and virtuous, but neither has he shown their viciousness, their cruelty, and their filthiness. He has not revealed how the spark of the divine smoulders in places dark and vile. He gave those places a more searching scrutiny than did the fathers of humanitarianism, but he recoiled from them in the end, thus impersonalizing his view of the lower ranks, inducing a general and unlocalized pain, a hatred of all suffering whatsoever, a feeling that is only less in degree than that which one gets from the writings of Mr. John Galsworthy, not different from it in kind. This is a feeling that Dostoievsky, for example, never conveys.

[8] *Criticism and Fiction* (1893), p. 185.

This should not concern us as a limitation of subject matter, but as a condition that enfeebles his depiction of certain subjects when he insists upon treating them. It always happens when a reformer is touched by griefs and aspirations into which he cannot fully enter. It means a double accusation of the social system, and its effect is to shake one's faith in the efficacy of individual effort. A burden is thrown upon corporate society such as Victor Hugo never contemplated. We become our brother's keeper not merely in the sense that branded the first murderer, but in a sense that would make Abel responsible for his own fate.

That the only tenable ideal of a perfect society is one in which all stand equal before each other and before their God, is a fact that no one living in our century should deny; but it is equally true that such an ideal will not be realized in our century nor for many to come. We can accept it but as the far goal toward which the democratic spirit is gradually bringing the race. No one knew better than Howells that it could be reached only by a slow evolution, a struggle cheerfully and joyously to be waged. In an essay on equality as the only tenable basis of good society, he makes it clear that the world is growing better for the very reason that we have more and more of that good society which does not take a shabby pleasure in inequality, but which finds its satisfaction in getting on common ground with others. "As nearly as we can conceive it or forecast it," he says, "the new condition, the equality of the future, will be the enlargement of good society to the whole of

humanity. This seems to me so not only because, so far as we have social equality, it has grown out of human nature, but because we have already more of that equality than any other.''[9] In this natural and optimistic view his discouragement is unreasonable, and his reflection on individual effort especially dangerous. The enlargement of good society to all humanity being so transparently conditioned by the spiritual growth of individuals, of which legislation can only be the ultimate expression, it is idle to declare that society is cruel and unnatural because it is obviously imperfect, or to lament that men are not free and equal. Why, then, in the same essay, should he be disturbed by the man who stands behind his chair at dinner, or by the richer man who sits across the table? It is for essentially the same reason that the Reverend Mr. Peck is taken off by a railroad accident the moment it becomes imminent that either his ideas or those of his parishioners must prevail. For the same reason Mr. Wallace Ardith in *Letters Home* is pitied for the misery he causes even more than his victim—because Howells was a sensitive personality, and even as other popular and philosophic reformers, became frightened at the notion of holding the individual responsible for either good or evil. It is so convenient to lay everything at the door of that great ogre, Society.

Thus Howells as a social philosopher suffers in much the same manner that he suffers as a theorist of criticism, through minimizing the value of

[9] ''Equality as the Basis of Good Society,'' in the *Century* (1895), 29:67.

individual achievement. The reader may recall the odd figure to which his attention was directed in a previous chapter—that of a critic industriously engaged in expounding literature through the decades, but at the same time largely concerned in maintaining the futility of such employment. We here find him zealous in another cause dear to his heart, and in a like manner discarding the instrument of its prosecution. Strange figure of a perfectibilian harassed by doubts as to the perfectibility of the human soul!

He ought to be more greatly inspired even by the tragic efforts put forth by the personages of his creation. The really ardent reformers in his novels all die ineffectual deaths, most of them violent deaths. In their taking off the gentle Conrad Dryfoos and the patriarchal Lindau of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* bear the benediction of martyrdom, but Ansel Denton in *The World of Chance* perishes by his own hand in a delirium brought on by his obsession with socialistic notions. In his work as engraver, he has hit upon an invention, a new art process that will make him rich. He obeys the inner voice and destroys his work through fear that it will throw some other engravers out of work, but the sacrifice is not enough. Some innocent life must be paid in expiation of the crime; but, frustrate in his attempt to take that of his sister-in-law, Peace Hughes, he ends his own guilty one with prussic acid—the most lurid scene in all Howells' pages. And it is made perfectly clear that the more intelligent efforts of his father-in-law come to no more fruitful, though a more peaceful end.

The exoneration of the individual and the attribution of his misdeeds to the social order, an order which individual effort seems powerless to better, is the underlying purpose of *The Quality of Mercy* (1892). On the whole an impressive chronicle, with its searching and implacable inquiry after the far-reaching consequences of its hero's crime, it nevertheless offends more gravely than either *The World of Chance* or *A Hazard of New Fortunes* in the certainty with which its author feels able to fix the responsibility. Northwick, the absconding defaulter, is represented as a man with instincts toward the highest integrity, but cast into a world where supposedly honorable men very frequently take other people's money and find themselves unable to pay it back. By early training he believes in the moral government of the universe, and thus, from the religious point of view, is presented as a horrible example of the futility of that belief as a guide to conduct. The whole trouble with him is an environment which makes his sort of robbery possible. Says Matt Hilary, the softest of the tribe of millionaire socialists whom Howells called into being: "Northwick isn't the disease; he's merely the symptom."[10] And Putney: "He was a mere creature of circumstances—like the rest of us! His environment made him rich, and his environment made him a rogue. Sometimes I think there *was* nothing to Northwick, except what happened to him."[11] And thus the matter is developed at great length by Maxwell, the philosophic journal-

[10] *The Quality of Mercy* (1892), p. 166.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 474.

ist of the *Abstract,* who is done as a foil to Bartley Hubbard of the flashy and vulgar *Events.* The message of *The Quality of Mercy,* aside from its multitude of faithful and painstaking subsidiary studies, is that the social body is sick; but Howells is its anatomist, not its physician.

After all, the social conscience displays most of the phenomena exhibited in the operation of the personal variety. The race conscience hyperæsthetized to a degree precluding the execution of immediate duties to oneself and one's own, is, more perfectly than Howells has indicated in these works, the analogue of the personal conscience which tortured the Puritan on his pillow, and which is so hateful to him. One cannot but wish that he had sympathized with it less keenly, and been more critical of its excesses and morbidities.

The Utopian romance, *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894), is as definitely of its epoch as *Annie Kilburn* (1888), though it followed Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), in which Howells was greatly interested, after a number of years, while *Annie Kilburn* was strictly coeval with *Robert Elsmere* (1888). This romance and its much later sequel, *Through the Eye of the Needle* (1907), still make delightful reading, since they enclose with the repertoire of current banalities the most exquisite portraits of their sponsors, and give rein to the sort of argumentative fantasy which enlivens *The Seen and Unseen at Stratford-on-Avon,* a diversion at which our author has scarcely been approached. At work of this kind he is always in the vein, and never permits the argu-

ment to spoil the fun. He cleverly forestalls criticism on the platitudinous character of his ideal state by introducing at the lecture of the distinguished *voyageur,* Mr. Aristides Homos of Altruria, a professor of economics, who is prompt to a marvel in pointing out the borrowings from Plato, More, Bacon, Campanella, Bellamy, and William Morris.

If *A Traveler from Altruria* emphasizes any feature of Howells' complaint against American conditions better than the novels, it is his wonderment at the apathy of the poor, who have the remedial agency at hand by which the Altrurians saved themselves alive from the tentacles of plutocracy—the ballot. "If the poor American," he maintained in an essay of about the same time as the *Traveler,* "does not like it, or if he does not prefer a plutocracy to a democracy, he has the affair in his own hands, for he has an overwhelming majority of the votes. . . . If we have a plutocracy, it may be partly because the rich want it, but it is infinitely more because the poor choose it or allow it." [12] Which ought to suggest a closer examination of how it came about that the Altrurians did not allow it, for he has taken great pains to draw the parallel perfectly between Altrurian and American conditions.

The Altrurians, like the inhabitants of most visionary states, are palpably of a different clay from the humanity with which we have to deal. It is unnecessary to inquire whether or not their government would be desirable for America, since

[12] "Are We a Plutocracy?" in the *North American Review* (1894), 158:196.

it would in any event be impossible. A helpful social philosophy will show not the vision of a New Jerusalem, but the steps by which it was attained. Such a philosophy will be bound to regard aristocracy as an inevitable stage in the progress of civilization, not as something unnatural to be swept away; but it will not be so short-sighted as to conclude that in view of the past service of aristocracy, we must have it always. In such a rational view, the duties of society to the individual will cease to appear antithetic to the responsibilities of the individual for himself and to the society of which he is a part. The ideal order will be offered as an ideal, not as a standard of comparison. As an ideal it spells hope, but as a present necessity it invites despair. A profitable *voyage imaginaire* would lead its reader to decrease his faith in the millennium and reconceive his notion of present efficacy. Such a reconception would not reveal in the social and economic world the operation of laws so exactly definable as those of the material world, but it would bring some order out of the chaos of *The World of Chance.*[13] Basil March, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes,* seems to voice Howells' desire:

[13] "Life is never the logical and consequent thing we argue from the moral and intellectual premises. There ought always to be evident reason in it; but such reason as it has is often crossed and obscured by perverse events, which, in our brief perspective, give it the aspect of a helpless craze. Obvious effect does not follow obvious cause; there is sometimes no perceptible cause for the effects we see. The law that we find at work in the material world is, apparently, absent from the moral world; not, imaginably, because it is without law, but because the law is of such cosmical vastness in its operation that it is only once or twice sensible to any man's experience. The seasons come and go in orderly course, but the incidents of human life have not the orderly procession of the seasons; so

"But what I object to is this economic chance-world in which we live, and which we men seem to have created. It ought to be law as inflexible in human affairs as the order of day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat, and shall not be harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come. Nothing less ideal than this satisfies the reason."[14]

After Mr. March has proceeded to some length with a dismal picture of the capricious world we have created and maintain, his wife suggests that matters would be less uncertain were people not so greedy and so foolish. "Oh, without doubt!" admits Mr. March. "We can't put it all on the conditions; we must put some of the blame on character."

"But conditions *make* character; and people are greedy and foolish, and wish to have and to shine, because having and shining are held up to them by civilization as the chief good of life. We all know they are not the chief good, perhaps not good at all; but if some one ventures to say so, all the rest of us call him a fraud and a crank, and go moiling and toiling on to the palace or the poor-house. We can't help it. If one were less greedy, or less foolish, some one else would have, and would shine at his expense. We don't moil and toil to ourselves alone; the palace or the poor-house is not merely for ourselves, but for our children, whom

far as the sages or the saints are able convincingly to affirm, they have only the capricious vicissitudes of weather."—*The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), p. 282.

[14] *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1891), vol. II, p. 252.

we've brought up in the superstition that having and shining is the chief good. We dare not teach them otherwise, for fear they may falter in the fight, when it comes their turn; and the children of others will crowd them out of the palace into the poor-house. If we felt sure that honest work shared by all would bring them honest food shared by all, some heroic few of us, who did not wish our children to rise above their fellows—though we could not bear to have them fall below—might trust them with the truth. But we have no such assurance; and so we go on trembling before Dryfooses, and living in gimcrackeries."[15]

Howells has shown us very few of the people who do not tremble before Dryfooses and do not live in gimcrackeries, presumably because they are not representative of our civilization. Those who in his novels wage war on Dryfooses and gimcrackeries do so for the most part in the Utopian manner. Impatient of the slow processes of racial enlightenment, they offer us perfection or nothing—and fail. They are perhaps the national types, but it is greatly to be feared that their author leaned toward them as he did not lean toward his aristocrats and Puritans, and that he himself from time to time found discouragement in the fact that human effort does not work with the precision of a mechanical or a chemical process, as Altrurian effort does. He killed the Reverend Mr. Peck and allowed the Reverend Mr. Sewell to live on. The recrudescence of the historical romance in which the last century closed caused him to despair for literature, although the

[15] *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1891), vol. II, p. 253.

infection was losing its hold when he spoke, and quickly subsided. He doubted the influence of his father's newspaper, almost the sole intellectual force operating in his community.

In the domain of personal ethics, he always breathes a more inspiriting message; for if amid the destruction and the chaos through which the race of men are struggling toward brotherhood the God of Israel slumbers, man finds consolation and reward in being true to himself. However irrational the moral government of the universe may appear, the fact of sin remains with us, and the "agency which we must still call 'God' punishes it."[16] Howells used "that quaint old word 'sin,' which has almost dropped out of our vocabulary, with a certain sense of its obsolescence, and perhaps of its original inaccuracy";[16] but he finds proved on the experimental plane that its wages is death, and that goodness has its reward of inward peace. That is the reward of Dr. Anther in *The Son of Royal Langbrith* (1904), when his long love story draws to its disappointing close, with the happiness that should have been his withheld—the rest to the soul. The happiness that comes for no particular merit to the son of Langbrith is seen to be a much less precious thing.

There is a freshness about *The Son of Royal Langbrith* that holds it long in the reader's memory. In general the novels written by Howells in his later years display a greater variety in substance and treatment than those of his earlier

[16] "Robert Herrick" in the *North American Review* (1909), 189:814.

and middle life, and this one takes up a new aspect of the provincial aristocracy—its subtle changes of tone with the coming of a new generation and new conditions. The central problem, as hinted by the title, is that ever-compelling one of fathers and sons, the cleavage between generations. In particular it deals with the sins of the fathers and the baronial tendencies of the young to ancestor-worship, and their peculiar emphasis on money they have not earned. This book is also one of its author's triumphs over literary self-consciousness—a triumph so complete that one looks back at it not with admiration for the rare nature of its achievement, as one looks back at *The Minister's Charge,* but with a sense of the simplest and purest artistic pleasure. And finally, in this story, Howells reconceives in a way the sociological notions of *The Quality of Mercy,* and vigorously tempers his mercy with justice.

Howells, as I have said, carries his fullest ethical conviction when he is defining and illustrating the responsibilities of the individual for his own happiness. The books he values most highly are those like *Anna Karénina, I Malavoglia,* and *The Mill on the Floss,* which show under the most ordinary circumstances the truth of the conflict between desire for present happiness and the instinct to be good, which reveal the necessity of moral law for the individual. To picture forth the degeneracy latent in a selfish nature, and to fix that more firmly in terms of our common condition than did George Eliot in *Romola,* was his purpose in his first "great" novel and his only "strong" one, *A Modern Instance* (1882). It was

surely his instinct for verifiability, and his desire to awaken his reader to consciousness of like possibilities in himself, that led him to dispense with the stronger motivation which places *Romola* above the sort of questioning that *A Modern Instance* has invited. The prevailing criticism has been that the book is under-motived, and that the catastrophe, while brought about by the reaction of character upon character, lacks inevitability—that one so shrewd and unscrupulous as Bartley Hubbard should at least have succeeded in a worldly way—socially and materially. It has been objected that Bartley's beer-drinking does not adequately account for his disintegration of soul. And indeed it were a feeble warning against the perils of the cup. The trouble with Bartley lies deeper and is very accurately diagnosed by Squire Gaylord very early in his history —on that memorable night when, after the engagement has been broken, Bartley dismissed, and Marcia sent away to visit in the town where she used to go to school, she steals back to tell her father that she cannot live without him.

"Oh, you poor, crazy girl!" groaned her father. "Don't you see that the trouble is in what the fellow *is*, and not in any particular thing that he's done? He's a scamp, through and through; and he's all the more a scamp when he doesn't know it. He hasn't got the first idea of anything but selfishness."[17]

That is a scene fraught with greater terror than many of those which signalize Bartley's actual

[17] *A Modern Instance* (1882), p. 110.

decline, the wholesome terror of unrealized possibilities, which Howells found so salutary and was so anxious to inspire. It was Mr. Hamlin Garland, if I remember correctly, who called Bartley Hubbard the modern substitute for a villain.

If in making Bartley consummately worldly, he raised the question as to why such a man should not succeed in the world, he answered it in *The Landlord at Lion's Head,* his master novel, by allowing Jeff Durgin to reap the full reward of his worldliness, and making his spiritual tragedy even more impressive than Bartley's. There is, however, a subtler reason for the inferiority of *A Modern Instance* to this greatest of all his novels, and that lies in the fact that Bartley's particular variety of smartness constitutes a manifestation that always arouses Howells' wrath more than his pity. Howells seldom indulges in partiality, but he has taken a brief against the smart young man, the one American type odious to him. Freshness is his abomination, and in its protean guises he scourges it through a full third of his novels. The miserable little Dickerson in *The Coast of Bohemia* is perhaps the worst example of his kind. Beaton, in *A Hazard of New Fortunes,* who is made to enact a fiasco-suicide in the Russian manner, represents the æsthetic egoist, but is not much different at heart from the salesmen and journalists. Bittredge, the pursuer of Ellen Kenton in *The Kentons,* is Hubbard apotheosized; and while a note of poignant pathos is struck by introducing his fatuous mother, the sympathy is all for the mother, none for the offspring. Hubbard is accorded a more

humane treatment than any of these, it is true; but his redeeming traits are not greatly insisted upon, and he arouses no tithe of the sympathy one feels for Jeff Durgin.

Two sure claims *A Modern Instance* has to immortality: Squire Gaylord, the shrewd, quiet old lawyer of Equity, Maine, whither Bartley comes to run his newspaper and much against his prophetic instincts to win his daughter, and Marcia herself, almost universally pronounced the most fascinating and full-blooded of the Howells heroines. The Squire, a Yankee of Yankees, is a type that Howells was never to repeat in any such perfection; and that is to say that no one else has done his type half so well, for he is strictly in Howells' métier. His tragedy is not secondary in interest to the matrimonial wreck of Bartley and Marcia. In fact, the real tragedy, the one that cannot be touched by criticism, because it is in no sense a manipulation of life, but life itself, the simple and living fact of heart-broken fatherhood, is his. The courtroom scene in which the old man, so near the grave, offers up his last strength in defence of his daughter, is after all the ineffaceable moment of the book.

In *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1884) Howells furnished the study of degeneration in *A Modern Instance* with its complementary theme as strongly handled, and showed that ghastly picture of marital unhappiness its obverse in the affection and loyalty of the Lapham family. The theme of moral regeneration is not a common one in his work. For all his devotion to the Russians he

remained cautious if not skeptical as to the capacity of the human individual for essential change and development, reading the great novels like *Crime and Punishment, The Resurrection,* and *War and Peace,* his creative power unmoved by the redemption theme written so large in them. The extent of the liberty he allowed himself in Silas Lapham's case may be appreciated by recalling that of Dryfoos, where everything is done to persuade us that the capitalist was not really changed by his change of heart. "Does anything from without change us?" asks Basil March in his fashion of expounding his author's philosophy. "We're brought up to think so by the novelists, who really have the charge of people's thinking, nowadays. But I doubt it, especially if the thing outside is some great event, something cataclysmal, like this tremendous sorrow of Dryfoos's."[18] His apology would no doubt be that nothing cataclysmal happens to Silas Lapham, and that Silas does not change, but *develops.* For Howells does make a distinction—an exceedingly nice one—between changing and developing. Mr. March is made to bring this out as he continues his discussion with Mrs. March, who very properly wants to know what in the world it is that changes us, since things without cannot:

"Well, it won't do to say the Holy Spirit indwelling. That would sound like cant at this day. But the old fellows that used to say that had some glimpses of the truth. They knew that it is the still, small voice that the soul heeds, not the deafening blasts of doom. I suppose I should have to

[18] *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1891), vol. II, p. 318.

say that we didn't change at all. We develop. There's the making of several characters in each of us; we *are* each several characters, and sometimes this character has the lead in us, and sometimes that. From what Fulkerson has told me of Dryfoos I should say he had always had the potentiality of better things in him than he has ever been yet; and perhaps the time has come for the good to have its chance. The growth in one direction has stopped; it's begun in another; that's all. The man hasn't been changed by his son's death; it stunned, it benumbed him; but it couldn't change him. It was an event, like any other, and it had to happen as much as his being born. It was forecast from the beginning of time, and was entirely an effect of his coming into the world." [19]

At this point, Mrs. March interrupts her husband with cries, draws him back from the brink of fatalism, and involves him in confusions into which we perhaps ought not to go too deeply in view of the general validity of his observation and the need for its teaching still shown by our novel and by our theatre. The notion that makes tragedy, as Howells once expressed it *in propria persona,* a sort of "spiritual chemistry, combining the elements of character anew," is still a too common one. Call it change or development, as you will, Dryfoos does not get far in the process and Silas Lapham does. As Mr. March says, Dryfoos's offer to sell *Every Other Week* on easy terms when he has no further use for it is no miracle of magnanimity; Silas Lapham's sacrifice of all his worldly interests in response to an awakened

[19] *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1891), vol. II, p. 318.

sense of honesty, and his return to the little Vermont town of his early struggles, is a deeper thing. Silas has changed his view of life in the process of suffering—not as Pierre Bezukhoi of *War and Peace* exchanged his, but certainly after a fashion observable in no other of Howells' heroes.

This condition has contributed to the popularity of the story—and there can be little doubt that *Silas Lapham* is the best beloved of Howells' works. It probably owes much also to the fact that it immortalizes a type vastly more flattering to American readers than his other great characters—not only more flattering, but everyone is pleased to believe, actually more characteristic. Foreigners, indeed, agree that the financier and industrial captain, quickly risen from obscure origins to colossal prosperity and power is a type distinctive of our civilization. Neither they nor we, however, always recognize as one of his characteristic traits an Anglo-Saxon love of fair play. He habitually regards his business as a game to be played honestly, and is not apt to be cruel and unjust without self-deception. He is often unfortunate in having the rules in his own making, but in his darkest scheming he does love the game beyond the prize. The interesting moment in his career is when, as his ambitions grow and widen, he encounters something which he wants—social position, usually, but maybe only a new way of looking at and enjoying life—but which seems to be not a part of his game. He cannot see why. Such is the experience of Dryfoos in *A Hazard of New Fortunes,* and of Ralston in *Letters*

*Home,* but Silas Lapham epitomizes the whole of this truly national drama. His magnitude embraces as well those lesser types of American business men, like the enterprising Fulkerson of *A Hazard of New Fortunes,* but with the merely "smart" men of smaller ability and meaner egotism, the Bartley Hubbards and better, he has little in common. This is admirably left in the reader's mind by the interview with which the book opens. While primarily intended to place Silas Lapham on exhibition in all his pride, this chapter exhibits the interviewer as fully; egoism meets egoism, but the merely flippant air of superiority is struck off against substantial achievement. One does not escape the impression, I think, that Howells has tried to give a national as well as a dramatic significance to the vital circumstance that Lapham's innate honesty is made to contribute to his downfall. He has at any rate succeeded in giving it a strong racial color, differencing Lapham's honesty from the honesty of César Birotteau.

In comparing Silas Lapham with his French prototype, as I did in an earlier chapter, I neglected to note that even this superb creation is not without a touch of his author's literary self-consciousness. Howells plumes himself unduly in giving an air of finality to his hero's acceptance of the hard conditions which it has been his life's work to surmount. The year after *Silas Lapham* had come from the press, he blamed Balzac publicly for his leniency to César, complaining: "It is not enough to have rehabilitated Birotteau pecuniarily and socially, he must make him die tri-

umphantly, spectacularly, of an opportune hemorrhage, in the midst of the festivities which celebrate his restoration to his old home." [20] This is a little arbitrary, since, although Balzac does overdo César's honesty in its effect on his creditors, there is reason in his rehabilitation, just as there is in Lapham's failure to retrieve his fortune.

Howells' scorn of crises has left its finest effect upon *Silas Lapham* in the perfect naturalness with which the calamities are permitted to descend upon its hero's head. He declines to pursue the man as many authors do. One has only to recall, say *The Vicar of Wakefield,* which he has so lavishly praised from time to time, to feel the difference. There the author's hand is ruthless upon the shoulder of poor Doctor Primrose, pushing him from disaster into still more hopeless disaster. The only instance in which we catch Howells in the act of assisting tardy fate is when with specious cunning he burns the new house on the water side of Beacon Street. Save for this example of promptitude, the disasters accumulate with the delays and indirections which attend such matters in actual life.

In the optimistic air with which Lapham's calamity is consummated—not in the very end, which is given over to the Reverend David Sewell with his eternal speculation on the mysterious ways of Providence—may be read the moral significance of his history—in the repose in which his strong nature receives the worst and which is in-

[20] "The Editor's Study," in *Harper's Magazine* (1886), 73: 156.

sensibly communicated to his family. In his way Lapham has tasted consciousness of the elemental fact that we are part of a social order; and his cheerfulness is the cheerfulness of a capacity for acting his part in that order realized and fulfilled, just as truly as the bitterness which is Anna Karénina's portion is the bitterness of a capable soul whose part is denied and unfulfilled. The tragedy of Anna is that she finds by a thorny road, from which she is unable to extricate herself, what Maggie Tulliver divined—that individualism doesn't work, except for souls with some essential meanness in their composition. Those who ask little of life commonly receive less, but they have the mean compensation of seldom discovering what is lost. Anna has asked much of life; she is a soul above Emma Bovary, and infinitely above their swarm of lesser sisters who come to the same end. Consequently, when she discovers that Vronsky does not hold happiness for her, her disillusionment is a much vaster thing. It includes much more than her own fate, so much more that her death is only a personal culmination, which Tolstoi might or might not have given. Death and loss of fortune really have no vital importance as conclusions to two such histories of the spirit as *Anna Karénina* and *The Rise of Silas Lapham*. The fact that Silas Lapham does not retrieve his fortune is as inconsequent as that César Birotteau should rupture a blood vessel and die magnificently. When we come to *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1897) we find so far as concerns Jeff Durgin, whose spiritual history is there recorded, no ending at all.

At the close of his book, Silas Lapham emerges captain of his soul, though mastered by fate; Jeff Durgin, unthwarted by fate, never discovers that he has a soul. Jeff asks only the attainable of life, and realizes but vaguely the failure of his success. His tragedy is a tragedy of sheer incapacity for good, a complement in its way to Anna Karénina's, the supreme tragedy of capacity. The failure of the American youth is distinctly perceptible only to the observer of finer qualities than he—among his associates, Westover, the artist, who comes up to the hills one late summer's day to paint the mountain known from its striking configuration as Lion's Head. Protracting his sojourn at the Durgin farm-house in order to complete his canvas in the deep evening light which lends the huge granite mass its most impressive aspect, he strikes up a tentative comradeship with the boy whose fortunes he is to follow through later life. But Westover is the "Howells young man"—the insipid and somewhat feminized creation that Howells employed to typify the Boston culture, the nice young man. Hard as he tries, he is incapable of any effective sympathy with Jeff, who, for all his selfishness and materialism, is one of the most "sympathetic" characters among the men of Howells' world. He has not merely strength of body and power of will, but geniality and—before it is repressed by his disillusionment at Harvard—even joviality. His coming to worldly wisdom, his belief in the wickedness of the *beau monde,* his appetite for scandal, synchronous with his taste for wine and the theatre—these are beautifully done, but arouse only disgust in West-

over. Westover finally succeeds in convincing his young friend that his is an old-fashioned morality, and the young friend goes on with his own, which holds that "you pay, or you don't pay, just as it happens." [21] And Jeff is singularly qualified to get on without paying.

It was a triumph of an unusual kind for Howells to make a character of Jeff's stamp so appealing; but it might well have been predicted that the greatest of his novels would teach the lesson of such a life. Opposing as he did the persistence in our fiction of a morality that bestows upon spirituality rewards anything but spiritual, he was bound to show us in his most significant instance, not the selfishness punished by both inward and outward devastation, as he did in *A Modern Instance,* nor yet the serene triumph of honesty over material adversity, as he did in *The Rise of Silas Lapham,* but the sad insufficiency of the success which our world commonly allots to those mean enough to aim at individual happiness and strong enough to achieve it, this very national phenomenon of the successful failure. This is not merely to remove himself from "the category of futile villain-mongers," but to terrify us in the truest sense with what we are. *The Landlord at Lion's Head* is essentially a beautiful and a disturbing illumination of things not done. And no novel ever so searchingly revealed the inconsequence of what we do. Jeff might have succumbed to drink, but he did not; for he had inherited along with his maternal grandfather's weakness for wine a powerful will and a herculean constitution.

[21] *The Landlord at Lion's Head* (1908), p. 309.

He might have formed a vicious liaison with Bessie Lynde, but the impressiveness and the very validity of the Lynde episode are conditioned by the fact that he did not. He might have been a murderer, but he spared when he had him by the throat the man who had insulted and injured him. He might at the very least have committed arson, but his hotel burned by accident during his absence. Jeff's character is implacably delineated in view of his intentions and potentialities, for which things there is no place in his philosophy. And this is the rare and peculiar capacity in which the art of Howells, with its scorn of crimes and climaxes, can touch deeply.

The last phase of Howells' work as a novelist was his return for inspiration to the Middle-West from which he sprang. *New Leaf Mills* (1913) takes us back to the Ohio valley and to the time when Chicago was "quite a growing place," and substitutes for the psychological style which had begun disturbingly to afflict its author's work the glowingly reminiscent manner of *My Year in a Log-Cabin*. *The Leatherwood God* (1916) is likewise affectional rather than political in motive, limning the features of that primitive ante-bellum civilization with tenderness, but likewise presents in effect a most appealing picture of America in formation. These are autochthonous documents of the Mid-West, records that will stand with Hamlin Garland's *A Son of the Middle Border* and Ed Howe's *The Story of a Country Town*.

The humanistic problem presented by our frontier communities, as Ed Howe made compellingly clear in *The Story of a Country Town*, was largely

a religious one. The early settlers when they ceased to be pioneers still lived remotely, undisturbed by the commercial and industrial problems that agitated the populous quarters of the Republic, and religion remained the chief of their serious interests. "A fierce religiosity," notes Howells, "choosing between salvation and perdition, was the spiritual life which an open atheist here and there sweepingly denied."[22] And against this life he projects in the first of these chronicles the figure of Owen Powell, one from his own family portrait gallery, a democratic visionary of serene temperament and large benevolence, while in the second he offers an engagingly human specimen of the local "infidel."

In Matthew Braile, the genial agnostic and Justice of the Peace at Leatherwood, with his sense of justice and fair-play, with the infinite humanity that clothes his poor philosophy, and with the unconscious reverence in his nature, delicately touched, there is immortalized for early Ohio a type as verifiable as Squire Gaylord of New England. He sits on his splint-bottom chair, haloed by fumes from his corncob pipe, a figure of hawk-like repose, and discourses, compelling the respect and even the affection of the rustics about him, for all his maliciously reticent way of taking "the shine off of religious experience."

The story has its universal import as well, the career of Joseph Dylks, the horse-like creature with a black mane of hair and in broadcloth, who appears among the native exhorters with all the thrill of an apparition, snorting salvation, being

[22] *New Leaf Mills* (1913), p. 22.

symbolic of evangelistic imposture in all times the world over. Yet this aspect of the work did not please those who looked to *The Leatherwood God* for a sensational exposure of professional sin-hounding. Those who looked for that did not know their Howells. The big moments of this book are not those which compass the downfall of Dylks, when he is stripped and despitefully used, in "squalid travesty of the supreme tragedy of the race," or bring him, after that terrible night in the Temple, to trial and acquittal before Squire Braile. The excitement to the Howells initiate is in the little moments—the cry in the night of the poor woman who has brought the bolt of cloth from which her family is to be clothed in the winter that it may be wrought into a seamless garment and sees it maliciously rent by the "hounds." These are the moments that Howells alone renders ineffaceable, that invite his reader to actual spectatorship in his events, that contain the fine secret of his humanity.

It is gratifying to close this review of Howells' work with so happy an example of the way in which his nationalism and his humanitarianism worked together and of the way in which he was wont to resolve his human problems into their simplest and truest aspects, and to make these aspects the most impressive. His literary achievement is rooted in the condition that he was a great novelist who was also a great democrat. His various accomplishments array themselves about the central and arresting fact of his absorption in every-day men and women. He was not a great sociological theorist nor was he one of the multi-

tude; he was something better. He was a great artist who made the basis of his art the basis of all sociology. There is a letter from Mark Twain in the third volume of Mr. Paine's wonderful biography which puts this much better than I can. "You are old enough to be a weary man with paling interests," it reads, "but you do not show it; you do your work in the same old, delicate & delicious & forceful & searching & perfect way. I don't know how you can—but I suspect. I suspect that to you there is still dignity in human life, & that man is not a joke—a poor joke—the poorest that was ever contrived. Since I wrote my Bible (last year), which Mrs. Clemens loathes & shudders over & will not listen to the last half nor allow me to print any part of it, man is not to me the respect-worthy person he was before, & so I have lost my pride in him & can't write gaily nor praisefully about him any more. . . ." These, I think, are the most searching words that have ever been uttered on the art of William Dean Howells.

One aspect of Howells' democracy that should be mentioned in conclusion will continue to occasion difficulty with his admirers—the democratization of the arts. For many it were easier to vision the brotherhood of man than, let us say, popular editions of the Howells novels. But Howells never relinquished his faith in the effectiveness of the novel as a socializing instrument. He thought of literature as already out of the palace and the cloister and perhaps as far as the forum, and cherished what will seem to many of his friends the optimistic delusion that it must one day reach the market-place. He believed in Michael Ange-

lo's "light of the piazza" as an artistic criterion, even when Tolstoi invoked it to condemn "The Last Judgment," and spoke on more than one occasion of the "communistic era in taste." Mark Twain, indeed, in a friendly letter gave America one hundred years to make the Howells books as common as Bibles; but it were safer perhaps to rely on a more modest prophecy now made public in the letters of Henry James, who looked forward to what he called a "beautiful" time when the critical intelligence, an entity about which he was somewhat doubtful, should begin to render Howells its tribute.

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